

THE RIVERS OF FAITH: MARIOLOGY IN MARIAMABAD, PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

The Marian Shrine of Mariamabad, Pakistan is a Catholic Church, a site of pilgrimage famous for its unique ambiance and its yearly festival commemorating the birth of the Virgin Mary. Visitors and pilgrims include Christians, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs. The purpose of this study is to analyze various forms of devotion at Mariamabad from anthropological, phenomenological, and sociological perspectives. The focus is on the different confluences of Catholic and Islamic devotion, and the influence of the traditional religions of Pakistan on Catholic practices and vice versa. The unique encounter of devotees with the numinous (in the form of Mary) and spiritual satisfaction attained by pilgrims at Mariamabad suggest that religious belief transcends the barriers of cultures and traditions by absorbing native cultural roots and traditions within itself, thus creating unique and nuanced religious perceptions and distinct ritualistic practices.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

“As mariners are guided into port by the shining of
a star, so Christians are guided to heaven by Mary.”

– Saint Thomas Aquinas

Since I was born into a Catholic family in Pakistan, my religious identity informed a dominant part of my worldview. Christians are a minority group in Pakistan, comprising 1.60% of the population (Library of Congress, Federal Research Division 2005). But what does it mean to be a minority? I believe that this word comes with its own unique paradox. Any group associated with the term *minority* is often understood as the vulnerable opposite of the majority, often overlooked, suppressed, and stifled within the shadow of the dominant tradition, whether ethnic or religious. For instance, a simple internet search for “Christians in Pakistan” reveals stories of violence and despair (Mohsin 2016). Nevertheless, Pakistan is struggling to revive and uphold the values of nonviolence and harmony each day as it faces threats from religious radicals and opponents of peace (Shaukat 2016). However, amidst the strife between the various factions, there is a place where factions unite and the different religious groups come together peacefully. This place is a religious shrine hidden deep in Punjab in the Sheikhpura district in a village named Mariamabad located about fifty miles outside the city of Lahore. Mariamabad literally means “The village of Mary.” It covers an area of two thousand acres and is inhabited primarily by Christians. What draws over one million pilgrims every year is a three-and-a-half-meter statue of Mary, the Mother of Jesus, which stands in a grotto on an artificial hill. She stands in a white gown and blue veil with blue eyes and fair skin.¹ I visited the Mariamabad shrine for the first time in the summer of 2015. Before that, I had only heard about Mariamabad through family members who revere Mary of Mariamabad. Fortunately, I had an opportunity to visit

¹ I recognize the incongruity of brown skinned people venerating a white Mary, a topic which is beyond the scope of my thesis. The statue of Mary does not look like a Middle East Asian woman or even a South Asian. The visual representation of the statue of Mary depicts the motives of the European missionaries to assert their religious influence upon the newly converted Catholics of Punjab. Or, it may be a colonial move to assert claims over the culture and native religion. For now, the topic of colonial imposition of whiteness is beyond the scope of my thesis.

Mariamabad as a researcher to observe and study from both emic and etic perspectives the sacred location and the forms of devotional practices that take place there.

Through my visits to Mariamabad, which involved extensive anthropological and sociological research, I will present the *Rivers of Faith* that continues to flow at Mariamabad throughout the entire year and most significantly during the three-day annual pilgrimage held during the month of September. There is a twofold explanation for the term: “Rivers of Faith at Mariamabad.” First, the shrine is situated in the province of Punjab; whose name is a compound of two Persian words: *Pānj* (five), and *āb* (water). It signifies “the land of five rivers,” the major tributaries of the Indus River (Surinder M. Bhardwaj 2014). Second, although the shrine is part of the Catholic church, it attracts people from diverse religions such as Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs. The shrine thus turns into a river through which various tributaries of faith flow.



Fig 1.1: Statue of Mary at Mariamabad shrine.

Methodologies of Research

This research employs a combination of anthropological, sociological and phenomenological methods. While at the shrine during the fieldwork/anthropological aspect of my research, I conducted interviews with informant/practitioners in their native languages, Urdu and Punjabi, and in English in order to gain their perspectives on the cultural practices and religious rituals. Informants included Diocesan and Dominican clergy members, local Islamic scholars, and the devotees present at the three-day pilgrimage and festival. The sociological aspect of my study focuses on the interactions between the various people and their cultures, while engaged in both institutional and non-institutional Catholic inspired religious rituals and practices. These practices connect the participants with their figure of devotion for whom they gather together annually and throughout the year.

Finally, the research methodology also includes a phenomenological perspective. As stated by Matt Stefon:

Unlike sociology and anthropology, the phenomenology of religion treats religion as a phenomenon that cannot be explained in terms of any aspect of human society, culture, or thought. For example, as the product of history, as a creation of intellectual elites, or as a set of truths about reality or the ends of human life—though it interacts with these aspects (Stefon 2014).

This study explores the intersections of conventional practices and various forms of devotion concerning the perception of Mary as represented at the Mariamabad shrine. Recalling the French sociologist Émile Durkheim's classification of religious phenomena into the *sacred* and the *profane*, most phenomenologists of religion call this aspect *the sacred*. Those who do not will at least refer to it in terms that evoke the sense of an encounter with a sublime, suprahuman other (Stefon 2014). To comprehend the devotional phenomena and the ritualistic reverence

displayed by the adherents, I translate Urdu and Punjabi Marian devotional hymns into English and analyze them. The writing styles of both exhibit cultural aspects of veneration within the religious activities.

Stages of Mariology

Within the Catholic Church, Mary has her own sacred place. Mariology (the part of Christian theology dealing with the Virgin Mary) is not an exclusively Catholic concern, although it is a theological preoccupation that is more characteristic of Catholicism than of any other Christian tradition (McBrien 1980, 866). According to Father Richard P. McBrien, “Mary is understood as a type of the Church, as its mother, as a model of faith, as a sign of the Church’s hope in the coming of God’s Kingdom, and as the eminent member of the communion of saints” (McBrien 1980, 866). Similarly, during the interview conducted with Father Rochus Mehnga O.P., a Dominican priest from Lahore, he explained the importance of the word *mother* as understood by pilgrims of Mariamabad. He shared that the pilgrims, whether Muslims, Christians, or Hindus, venerate Mary as a mother (Mehnga 2016). The word mother, he explained, is a traditionally accepted word used to show respect and admiration towards any elderly woman. Mary, from this viewpoint, is the one who connects the people with her son Jesus. Therefore, their reverence for her is greater than for any other woman.

Within the Gospels, the infancy narrative in Matthew says little about Mary apart from the virginal conception. In the Gospel of Luke, however, the evangelist’s estimation of Mary is revealed principally through his telling of Jesus’ nativity (McBrien 1980, 866). McBrien summarizes the role of Mary in Luke’s version of the story:

She is hailed by Gabriel as one favored by God (1:28); her response shows her to be an obedient handmaid of the Lord (1:38); Elizabeth calls her “the mother of my Lord” (1:43)

and declares her blessed because of what God has done for Mary (1:42) and because of Mary's faith "that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled" (1:45). In her own canticle, the *Magnificat*, Mary acknowledges that "God who is mighty has done great things for me" (1:49). Luke, therefore, depicts Mary as the spokeswoman and representative of the *anawim*, the poor of Israel. She is a faithful hearer of the word, obedient to it and to the God who utters it (McBrien 1980, 866).

In the second century, Mary appears as a supporting figure to a more significant concern of that time—Christological controversies. Early post-apostolic sources regarding Mary are slight, and Marian references are extremely rare before the year 150 C.E. (McBrien 1980, 866). The texts come from two principal groups of writings: *pseudepigraphical* (written in the name of an apostle) and *patristic* (McBrien 1980, 866). Among the *pseudepigrapha*, the most important text written on Mary's role and character is the *Protevangelium of James*. Composed around the year 150 C.E., it contains information about the early family life of Mary, her birth, her engagement to Joseph, the annunciation, the birth of Jesus, the coming of the Magi, et cetera (McBrien 1980, 870).

McBrien argues that with the rejection of the humanity of Jesus by the Gnostics and Docetists, the issue of Mary's eternal virginity was even more convoluted. Emphasis on Mary's virginity heightened within the church for ascetical reasons and Mary was presented as a persuasive model for Christian women (McBrien 1980, 870). Due to the Nestorian controversy, Mary's status as the *Theotokos* (the God-bearer, the mother of God) received a boost in the fifth century that resulted in its widespread adoption. In the words of Marina Warner:

Nestorius was trained in the pragmatic traditions of Antioch, where the separation of Christ's two natures as God and man was firmly held, and he balked at this excessive—and in his eyes, heterodox—term of praise...he preached that the Word of God, who has

existed from all eternity, was not born in the stable at Bethlehem that first Christmas night. God was not a baby two or three months old, he declared, and Mary was either the mother of the man—*Anthropotokos* or at most, the mother of Christ—*Chirstotokos*—but she could not be the mother of God, because God had always been. Besides, he stressed that the use of such an extravagant title dangerously exaggerated Mary’s standing and raised her to the rank of a goddess, as worshiped by heathen (Warner 1983, 65).

Unfortunately, Nestorius’s controversial response led to his deposition at the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in the year 431 C.E. (Warner 1983, 65). As a result, following Ephesus, Marian devotion increased, and the pseudepigraphical literature became popular again. Liturgical feasts multiplied, namely the Annunciation, the Purification, the Assumption, and the Nativity of Mary (McBrien 1980, 897). In the eighth century Germanus promoted the idea that Mary appeases the wrath of God, the stern judge, which became one of the most popular themes of medieval Marian piety and devotion (McBrien 1980, 897). Now, Mary is seen in the West, as in the East, as the *redemptrix* of the captives, a refuge of sinners and a *mediatrix* between God and the humankind (McBrien 1980, 874). In Chapter Two, I discuss the role of Mary as a *Co-Redemptrix* for her devotees in Mariamabad.

Marian Theology: Dogma versus Practice

Mary has been revered as a “God-bearer” (*theotokos*) since at least the fourth century, as discussed in the previous section. Such reverence and admiration for her laid the groundwork for a unique cultic devotion towards her. Although for Catholics, however, as McBrien states, this cult differs essentially from the cult of adoration which is offered to the incarnate Word as well as to the Father and the Holy Spirit (McBrien 1980, 883). He argues, “although the Church has endorsed many forms of Marian piety, it has always insisted that they be within the limits of

sound and orthodox doctrine” (McBrien 1980, 883). Now, these various methods of veneration have varied and thus continue to adapt in accordance with the requirements of the time and place. In the 21st century, as in Mariamabad, the devotional forms have reflected the diversity of native characteristics among the faithful.

However, the devotees at spiritual shrines, such as the Marian Shrine of Mariamabad, often go beyond mere veneration of the religious figure. What is the recommended boundary between devotion and *excess* devotion for Catholics? McBrien writes that there are two extremes to be avoided in one’s attitude towards devotion to Mary. First, there is a temptation to exaggerate the divine role in salvation such that the importance of human cooperation (in Mary’s role) is lost (McBrien 1980, 883). This approach emphasizes that no person, Mary included, is ever worthy of adoration because such attention undermines the glory owed to God or to Jesus Christ—this extreme is termed *Marian minimalism* (McBrien 1980, 883). Second, there is a tendency to assume that there are practically no limits to such veneration. This extreme, *Marian maximalism*, according to Catholic experts exaggerates the principle of instrumental causality in Mary’s case and understates the significance and role of the Divine (McBrien 1980, 900). McBrien labels the devotion of Mary as a characteristically Catholic phenomenon in that it expresses three fundamental principles of Catholic theology and practice:

- (1) The principle of *mediation* affirms that grace is a mediated reality, first through Christ and secondarily through the Church and other human instruments, including Mary.
- (2) The principle of *sacramentality* affirms that the invisible and the spiritual God is present through the visible and the material, and that these are, in turn, made holy by the presence which includes Mary, in whom God is very especially present.
- (3) The principle of *communion* affirms that the saving encounter with God occurs not only personally and individually but corporately and ecclesiastically (McBrien 1980, 901).

Nevertheless, at Mariamabad, Marian devotion is not an exclusively Catholic phenomenon. It is a devotional experience that derives from the diverse culture and atmosphere of South Asia.

There, the clergy hesitate to call it a Catholic phenomenon in its entirety and, instead, describe the intersecting acts of devotion as forms of popular religiosities. In Chapter Three, “The Sacred Phenomenon in Mariamabad,” I unfold the discourse of excessive and understated Marian veneration at Mariamabad, with the support of several interviews conducted with notable Pakistani Catholic leaders and theologians, such as Father Emmanuel Asi,² Father James Channan O.P., Bishop Joseph Arshad of the diocese of Faisalabad, clergy of the Dominican Order in Lahore, and also with the devotees of the Mary of Mariamabad.

Shrine of Mary in Pakistan

A shrine is defined as a place regarded as holy because of its associations with a divinity or a sacred person or relic, marked by a building or other construction (English Oxford Living Dictionaries 2017). Shrines may be found anywhere, and they may be local, national or international. Catholics tend to view the person of Mary as having a variety of personalities, each of which can become a candidate for reverence in harmony with the local cultural values. For example, Catholics venerate Mary as *Our Lady of Mount Carmel*, *Our Lady of Lourdes*, or *Our Lady of Fatima*; they celebrate the feast of the *Immaculate Conception* and they revere the *Immaculate Heart* of Mary. Each of these personas of Mary has its own iconography and set of prayers. In a similar way, Mary of Mariamabad is honored in a distinct fashion, quite differently

² Father Emmanuel Asi is a Pakistani Catholic theologian. He received his religious training at Christ the King Seminary in Karachi, Pakistan and was ordained a priest in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Lahore in the year 1974. He obtained a doctoral degree in Theology from the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome. He has served as a parish priest at the Marian Shrine at Mariamabad for four years.

from the other locations where she is venerated. The image of Mary in Pakistan has become part of the local culture. In the Marian Shrine of Mariamabad, Mary's statue is mostly covered with the cultural veils and stoles (*chador* or *dupatta*). She is faithfully venerated by her followers, who offer gifts to her. Her devotees often decorate her with exquisite jewelry, such as a gold tiara and necklaces, as a representation of giving thanks or as votive offerings.

Catholics over the centuries have routinely reported that they have seen or heard from supernatural beings such as Christ himself or the Virgin Mary. While such experiences are not unknown to Protestants, they have generally not led to the establishment of sanctuaries like Lourdes, Fatima, or the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City, which draw millions of pilgrims each year (Michael 1992, 2). Likewise, the devotees of Mary at the Marian shrine of Mariamabad are drawn towards the shrine each year, specifically, during the three-day annual pilgrimage to experience the spiritual encounter with Mary.

Pakistan is home to several of the most famous religious shrines in South Asia, such as the shrine of Abdullah Shah Ghazi in Karachi, the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan, the shrine of Shah Rukn-e-Alam in Multan, and the shrine of Data Ganj Bakhsh in Lahore, among many others. The ritualistic veneration of the Sufi saints in Pakistan is a distinctly institutionalized form of the popular Sufi tradition, developed somewhere between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries (Frembgen 2008, 30). The intercession of saints replaces the direct contact of an adherent with God as it existed in the mysticism of early Islam with the veneration of the *پیر* *pir*³ as mediator to the divine (Frembgen 2008, 30). According to Frembgen, “a Sufi

³ (Michel Boivin 2015, 245). *Pir*: derived from Persian, *pir* is an elder, the equivalent of Arabic Shaikh, *pirani*: female *pir*, *pirzado*: the descendent of a *pir*. The word is used in South (Frembgen 2008) Asian Sufism to address a Sufi master. Generally, the descendant of the founder of a shrine, or of one of his closest initiated followers. A *Pir* is respected as being the bearer of the *Baraka* of the Sufi saint who is buried within the shrine.

shrine (*dargah, darbar, ziyārat*) is the center of the *pir* based meditational Sufi Islam, which is the most popular form of Sufi tradition in Pakistan” (Frembgen 2008, 35). It is where the people encounter the numinous as Abida Parveen, the famous Pakistani Sufi singer once said, “At the Sufi shrines, the shadow of Allah is omnipresent, penetrating everything—here every path leads to eternity...” (Frembgen 2008, 35). The numerous similarities between the ambiance and devotional forms at a Sufi shrine and the Marian shrine are numerous and are discussed in later chapters.



Fig 1.2: Grotto Hill entirely covered with the chadors and veils dedicated by the devotees.

To understand Marian veneration in Mariamabad, it is necessary to understand the appeal and character of Mary from both Christian and Islamic perspectives. Mary is venerated by Muslims in great numbers at Mariamabad but, of course, they view her through their own spiritual lens. A diverse cultural atmosphere emerges when people express their devotion in their own way and from their personal understanding of the sacred. To comprehend the foundation of their devotion to Mary is to give meaning to the esteem and reverence they have for her figure.

To help understand this perspective, I examined the *Sūrah Maryām* from the Qur’ān and interviewed prominent Islamic scholars such as Mawlānā Abdul Khadir Azad and Mawlānā

Mufti Mūeed Assad Ludhianwi from Toba Tek Singh, Faisalabad. I also spoke to the Muslim devotees of Mariamabad and heard their accounts of faith and devotion to Mary. I will discuss Muslim perspectives later on.

Mariamabad and other Marian Shrines

Shrines affiliated with Mary are found throughout the world and they share similar qualities in terms of veneration, devotion, and ambiance. As an example, I would like to draw a comparison between a Marian shrine in Poland and the Marian shrine of Mariamabad. Although the region and culture of the countries where both the shrines are located are vastly different, the phenomenon of devotion is strikingly similar. In Poland, Marian veneration is deeply rooted in Polish history, culture, and society –images of Our Lady can be found all over the country where an estimated seven hundred shrines are devoted to Mary (Niedźwiedź 2016, 87). Similar features are observed when looking at Marian devotion in Mariamabad, and in both cases, culture plays the most prominent role in distinguishing the image of Mary from the rest of her images around the world. In Poland, Mary is considered the *Master Symbol* for her devotees (Niedźwiedź 2016, 87). According to Busser and Niedźwiedź:

Represented as “Our Lady of Czestochowa,” Mary gradually developed, following the terminology of Eric Wolf (1958), into a Polish master symbol that drew its power from its multiple meanings in different contexts. It became a symbol that unified widely diverging interests and thereby linked different groups together. Mary represented motherhood and devotion—thus appealing to all social classes—but also became a core symbol of the Polish resistance movement during the Partition Period (1795–1918) (Niedźwiedź 2016, 87).

Mary as a Polish master symbol is considered a powerful religious figure because of her ability to implement her authority on two diverse spheres: first, private religious practices—Mary as the mother of individual people—and second, deeply rooted in the Polish national myth of origin—Mary as the queen of the Polish nation (Niedźwiedź 2016, 87).



Fig1.3: Image of Our Lady of Czestochowa in decorative robes and crown. (Photo: Archive of Jasna Gora, Collection of Votive Art).

Both the shrines have a distinct historical background, yet over time they have emerged as vivid symbols of individuality and religious persistence. For example, during the Communist period in Poland (1945-89), the Polish people sought inspiration and support from Mary both on

an individual level and in her role as a guardian and protector of the Polish nation in its struggle for independence (Niedźwiedź 2016, 87). Similarly, many Catholic devotees at Mariamabad credit Mary for protecting the devotees during the three-day annual pilgrimage, and also for guarding them within a country where the Christian population is less than two percent (Asi 2016). The large number of devotees at the shrine of Mary in Mariamabad represents their faith in her protecting power. Despite threats and security issues faced by the pilgrims and devotees each year during the yearly three-day festival, the number of devotees does not seem to diminish (Asi 2016). Another similarity is that both religious sites welcome non-Catholics (Niedźwiedź 2016, 99).

The central symbol of the Marian cult in Poland relates to a centuries-old image of Mary and child (Niedźwiedź 2016, 88). Marian veneration in Mariamabad consists of an exuberant devotion directed toward the motherly figure of Mary. The majority of Catholic devotees at Mariamabad are from the lower middle class and are from the villages across the country. Similarly, in Poland, most the Polish peasantry were illiterate until the end of the nineteenth century, and sacred images played an important role in lived religion and led towards the formation of a *folk theology of images* in which such images were symbols in the most literal meaning of the word, meaning that they were treated as objects participating in the nature of the imagined figure” (Niedźwiedź 2016, 88).

Marina Warner writes that Mary mediates between heaven and earth, for in her glorified body she belongs in both realms (Warner 1983, 285). Therefore, when the devotees ask for Mary’s favor in the form of prayer, they bring votive offerings. The giving of prayerful offerings is also a common theme shared by the devotees of Our Lady of Czestochowa and the Marian Shrine of Mariamabad. The pilgrims in Czestochowa often leave votive offerings in front of the

image of Our Lady of Czestochowa to appeal to Mary for personal aid. Sometimes these votive offerings are visible signs of miracles that were believed to have taken place, for example, crutches left by those who have been healed, and numerous interviews have mentioned personal experiences of Mary's miraculous powers in the spheres of health and family issues (Niedźwiedź 2016, 96). Likewise, during the annual pilgrimage at Mariamabad, thousands of devotees come specifically to give testimonies of miraculous healings and of personal prayers answered through the intervention of Mary.

The collective gathering of over one million people annually during the three-day pilgrimage produces a positive, uplifting, and satisfying religious experience for the devotees. The perceived connection of the adherents with the divine constructs a unique relationship between the participants and the numinous, Mary. The place is considered a sacred space for the Catholic devotees of Mary, while, on the other hand, the shrine is also open to the non-Catholic devotees throughout Pakistan and elsewhere. Resulting from the multi-cultural and diverse religious presence of believers of different faiths, regional cultural practices are uniquely blended with Catholic institutional practices, creating a tapestry of beliefs. The holy site serves as a meeting place for various religious and nonreligious practices and beliefs without any reported ideological conflict.

History of the National Marian Shrine of Mariamabad, Pakistan

The Christian community at Mariamabad has existed for more than a century, and Mariamabad is perhaps, the oldest Catholic village in the diocese of Lahore. When I asked Father Emmanuel Asi to shed some light on the historical background of the Mariamabad shrine, he smiled and said, "An important aspect of popular religiosity is that people do not want to go

into the details of historical background.” However, for my benefit, he shared a few facts. In the year 1880 C.E., the village of Mariamabad began to prosper.⁴ He shared an engaging narrative of why Mariamabad is named after Mary. According to Father Asi, the first five people who came to Mariamabad were two priests and three lay persons. Before its development, the land was filled with wild bushes and trees. When the five men visited the place, they pulled their horses aside to rest for a while, and then recited their rosaries (Asi 2016). Father Asi explained:

And it happened to be a Saturday which ecclesiastically, is a day dedicated to Mary. The men mutually decided that the place would be named after Mary. Therefore, they called it *Maria-abad* to signify the Latin name of Mary. Later it was named *Marri-abad* in Punjabi and for the past three decades it has been called *Mariamabad*, inferring to Mary’s name in Urdu, *Mariam* (Asi 2016).

In an Urdu booklet *قومی زیارت گاہ مریم آباد Quami Ziyarat-gah Mariamabad*,⁵ Father Asi gives a detailed narrative of the historical background of Mariamabad:

During the mid-eighteenth century, the Christian population of Punjab resided sporadically in different cities, villages and towns. They did not have any area designated for prayer and worship where they could gather as a community in times of joy or sorrow. In 1882, Bishop Emmanuel Won Dan Bush and Father Edwards O.C. bought one hundred and fifty acres of land from the then attorney general of India, Mr. Gulab Singh. Two months later, another five hundred and twenty-five acres of land were bought. In January 1893, Father Diaz Ire O.C. Father Englebert O.C. and three other men (local lay missionaries) who were from the city of Sialkot travelled for seven days to found the village of Mariamabad. Within the same year, the families of the lay missionaries also joined their mission and assisted them. During this period, the priests rented a house

⁴ Father Asi uses the word *abad*, آباد, which means a “cultivated place”. This word is derived from the Persian word *āb*, آب meaning “water”. This word is also used to signify prosperity.

⁵ National Pilgrimage Site, Mariamabad.

about twelve kilometers away from the Mariamabad Parish in the village of Khankah Dogra. Without any assistance, means of transportation, or adequate food supply, the priests and the missionaries worked day and night to develop the acquired land. In the same year, Father Felix O.C. was sent to Mariamabad to assist the other priests. Father Felix is remembered as the founder of Mariamabad because he started the plantation and farming there (Asi n.d.).⁶

Thus, the newly settled families built homes, worked the land, and received compensation for their labors from their landlord, the Catholic diocese (Colgrove 2010, 155). According to Father John Joseph, former secretary of the annual National⁷ Marian Pilgrimage, local Christians attended the traditional fairs in the neighboring communities, which offered opportunities to interact with the community and meet new people. On March 19th, 1925, parish priest Reverend Father Oscar O.C., with the help of the local people, built a hill within the premises of the Mariamabad church, which was created as a replica of the Marian grotto and hill in the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Lourdes, France (Asi 2016). In Father Asi's words:

In the year 1949, Fr. Frank, a Belgian Capuchin who was later martyred, realized the importance and popularity of traditional and folk events among the inhabitants of Mariamabad. As a result, he decided to initiate similar events in Mariamabad. After consulting various religious leaders, it was finally decided in July of the same year, that on every eighth of September, the day commemorating Mary's birth, an annual feast to celebrate Mary's nativity would be held at Mariamabad Church. On September 8, 1949,

⁶ All Urdu translations are mine, unless stated otherwise.

⁷ The word "National" in the term "National Marian Shrine" is used to indicate the popularity of the shrine throughout Pakistan, though whether the shrine is declared "National" by the Council of Bishops appointed by the Vatican is still under debate. The current Bishop of Faisalabad Diocese, Bishop Joseph Arshad, who was the first Pakistani priest to join the Vatican diplomatic service, explained in the interview that the Marian Shrine is "National" as a form of popular religiosity because it is a well-known local Catholic religious site.

the first pilgrimage took place. Pilgrims offered rice, lentils, wheat, oil, and wood as offerings. In the first year, the celebration of the Marian feast lasted for one day.

Recitation of the rosary and singing of Marian hymns was an important part of the festival and the sermon was given in the Punjabi language (Asi n.d.).

Each year during the annual pilgrimage, enthusiasm of the devotees is such that they arrive by public transport, vans, buses, and cars, while many ride bicycles for miles and even walk barefoot to the shrine. As stated by Colgrove, the government of Punjab, in the year 2007, added electronic gates and deployed more than one thousand police officers to safeguard the shrine and its pilgrims. In the year 2008, the fifty-ninth annual Marian pilgrimage attracted nearly one million pilgrims from all religions, including Catholics, Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs (Colgrove 2010, 155). For a few pilgrims, however, this spiritual journey is their last one. Bishop Joseph Arshad noted that every year many pilgrims from different age groups die while travelling to Mariamabad for the annual pilgrimage. This year, for example, one young man died on his way to the shrine (Arshad 2016).

Every year at Mariamabad the pilgrimage committee arranges for pavilions within the church premises to provide shelter to the pilgrims from extreme weather. Pavilions serve the devotees who wish to remain at the shrine for couple of days. Also, several aid organizations of different religious affiliations provide medical camps and kiosks with free water and beverages at various locations to assist pilgrims who are walking and cycling on their spiritual journey. Due to the lengthy journey on foot, many suffer from dehydration and heat stroke. Yet, for many adherents, such exertions are unimportant compared to the sense of spiritual satisfaction they experience at the shrine. Welcome signs and words of encouragement are posted at many places throughout the cities on billboards and walls to support and uplift the pilgrims during their journey to the shrine.

In contrast with the historical significance of the Mariamabad shrine, many devotees believe that a physical manifestation of Mary at the sacred location led to its founding, or that a miracle through Mary's intercession motivated the devotees to build a religious shrine in her honor. However, Father Asi and other clergy members confirmed during the interviews that neither apparitions nor miracles led to the formation of the Mariamabad shrine (Asi 2016). Rosemary Colgrove, however, in her book *Eye on the Sparrow: The Remarkable Journey of Father Joseph Nisari, Pakistani Priest*, states that according to a popular legend, a Muslim woman from a neighboring village built the first shrine to Mary in Mariamabad. She writes:

She had borne no children in her marriage and one day, on her way to visit her parents, she passed the church at Mariamabad and saw the *Holy Mother's* statue. "Oh, Mother of Jesus," she prayed, "I hear that you have great powers, and I am asking you, woman to woman, to pray for me that I may have a child. And if I am successful, I promise to build a shrine in your honor." It happened that a year later she gave birth to a son and, faithful to her promise, she built a shrine to honor Mary (Colgrove 2010, 156).

Émile Durkheim introduced the phrase *collective consciousness* as a label for "the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of society" (Jones 1986). According to Durkheim, religion comes into being and is legitimated through moments of what he calls *collective effervescence*:

Collective effervescence refers to moments in societal life when the group of individuals that makes up a society comes together to perform a religious ritual. During these moments, the group comes together and communicates in the same thought and participates in the same action, which serves to unify a group of individuals. When people come into close contact with one another and when they are assembled in such a fashion, a certain "electricity" is created and released, leading participants to a high degree of collective emotional excitement or delirium. This impersonal, extra-individual

force, which is a core element of religion, transports the individuals into a new, ideal realm, lifts them up outside of themselves, and makes them feel as if they are in contact with an extraordinary energy (Carls n.d.).

For the devotees, the phenomena of collective exuberance play a pivotal role in charging their emotions. Whether the origin of the Marian shrine of Mariamabad was a supernatural one or whether it has a well-established sequence of history attached to it, the shrine is an epicenter of devotion, peace, and faith. It is a place where the believers experience the numinous. To the devotees, not only is Mary the mother of Jesus, but she is revered as a “Universal Mother” who listens to the pleas of her children. The collective enthusiasm is such that when the speaker during the prayer session prays and pleads to Mary, people weep like children crying out to their parents. Similarly, for many Catholic devotees, she is رحم دل مان *rehām-dil ma*,⁸ who petitions Jesus on their behalf.

⁸ The loving and forgiving heavenly Mother.

CHAPTER TWO
INSTITUTIONAL AND POPULAR FORMS OF DEVOTION

“How sublime is this humility, which is incapable of yielding to the weight of honors, or of being rendered proud by them! The Mother of God is chosen, and she declares herself His handmaid.”

–St. Bernard of Clairvaux

For the faithful at Mariamabad, religious practices are an important part of their devotion. For the Catholic clergy, however, it is often challenging to align such devotional practices with church teachings. In this chapter, I will explore the power of popular religiosity at Mariamabad and the role, if any, played by the Church in maintaining discipline and a sense of uniformity between the devotional practices and the Church teachings.

Bernard of Clairvaux was one of the most influential medieval theologians for the development of Mariology (Pennington n.d.).⁹ His sermons, “In Praise of the Virgin Mary” affirmed the medieval Christian’s childlike trust in Mary’s ameliorative power (McBrien 1980, 874). He influenced not only popular devotion but theology as well. In Bernard’s view, Mary played a significant role in redemption. According to McBrien, Bernard believed:

She was the aqueduct that leads the waters of divine grace down to earth. God willed us to have “everything through Mary,” a saying that became a principle of Mariology, to be repeated...by popes, theologians and spiritual writers down to Pope Pius XII in the middle of the twentieth century (McBrien 1980, 874-875).

However, the Catholic Church has always maintained that Mary is not worshiped as a deity, but rather is revered simply as the mother of Jesus Christ. The Catholic institution often appears divided between cultural forms of devotion and Church doctrine. For instance, the Catholic Church teaches its adherents the importance of sacraments, the catechistic prayers, and how to act during the Eucharistic celebration. What it does not teach is the manner by which a person expresses his or her devotion towards a religious figure. When I asked Father Emmanuel Asi if the religious practices taking place in Mariamabad are within the jurisdiction of the Catholic

⁹ (Pennington) Bernard, the founding abbot of Clairvaux Abbey in Burgundy, was one of the most commanding Church leaders in the first half of the twelfth century. He was born in 1090 C.E. and entered the Citeaux abbey in 1112 C.E. As a young abbot, he published a series of sermons on the Annunciation. These marked him not only as a most gifted spiritual writer but also as the “cithara of Mary,” especially noted for his development of Mary’s mediatorial role.

Church, he explained that the annual Marian pilgrimage is monitored by the institution, which organizes it in the best way possible, but popular spirituality always takes place outside the institutional realm (Asi 2016). He further explained that the entire devotional experience is deemed *popular* because it is fueled by religious effervescence (Asi 2016).

Thousands of people are present during the three-day festival, yet rarely will a person attend the pilgrimage because a priest encouraged him or her to do so (Asi, Interview with Father Emmanuel Asi 2016). According to Father Asi, “On most occasions, people have had already asked about the pilgrimage dates and schedule from their own sources, and if they arrive four days before the annual pilgrimage or two days after, that does not matter to the devotees” (Asi 2016). The separation of dogma and practice is visible when the adherents display their devotion to Mary in methods which mirror appreciation–practices rooted in their culture.

The Encounter of the Co-Redemptrix with the Popular Religiosities of Mariamabad

I asked Father Marcus Daniel O.P., a Dominican priest for the past twenty-eight years, about the spiritual relationship of the pilgrims with the visual representation of Mary. At Mariamabad her figure is a representation of a mediating mother who is both merciful and powerful at the same time. He explained that “Mary is the Co-Redemptrix¹⁰ (Miravalle n.d.): she has the power to intercede with her son on behalf of her devotees.” He quoted from the Gospel of John 2:11, the popular miracle of Jesus at the wedding at Cana,¹¹ attributing the first miracle of Jesus to his

¹⁰ (Miravalle n.d) “From the Catholic perspective, the word *Co-Redemptrix* refers to Mary’s unique human participation with Jesus (and entirely subordinate to her divine Son) in the historic work of saving humanity from sin.”

¹¹ John 2:1-5. NRSV. On the third day, there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there; and both Jesus and His disciples were invited to the wedding. When the wine ran out, the mother of Jesus said to Him, “They have no wine.” And Jesus said to her, “Woman,

mother, Mary, and said that Jesus agreed to perform this miracle only because Mary interceded on the behalf of the people (M. Daniel 2016).¹²

However, the term “Co-Redemptrix” left a lasting impression on my mind. It seemed as if the priest were casting Mary as the female counterpart of the Redeemer, Jesus. When I asked Father Daniel if that is what he meant, he was quick to add, “Mary is called the Co-Redemptrix because she played the most important role in the process of redemption; being the mother of Jesus, her *yes* to the angel Gabriel mattered the most. Certainly, she is not the female version of the Redeemer. Salvation is gained through Christ alone” (M. Daniel 2016).¹³ Notably, this perplexity goes back to the time of Bernard of Clairvaux. He had a great devotion to Mary but strongly opposed the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception just like Thomas Aquinas, who based his opposition on the argument that it would distract people from the universality of Christ’s redemptive work (McBrien 1980, 876). Bonaventure, however, a contemporary and friend of Aquinas, also recognized Mary’s role in the redemptive act, when she consented to the sacrifice of her Son on the cross and offered the price of her compassion. It was this view that led to the belief in Mary as Co-Redemptrix of humanity, even though Bonaventure himself insisted on the independence of Christ’s redemptive act (McBrien 1980, 876). Marina Warner explains this through the explanation of a Catholic interpretation of Jesus’ miracle in John 2:

In Mariological teachings, her intervention illustrates her pity, compassion and thoughtfulness, but more importantly, it prompts effect—inauguration of Christ’s messianic mission by a spectacular miracle—radiantly reveals the efficacy of

what does that have to do with us? My hour has not yet come.” His mother said to the servants, “Whatever He says to you, do it.

¹² Also, Marina Warner in her book *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* writes that the Gospel of John mentions two pivotal incidents that have contributed greatly to the topic of Mariology: the miracle of Cana and the vigil of Mary at the foot of the cross.

¹³ Luke 1:26–56. NRSV.

her intercession with Christ, while the actual prodigy itself, the transformation of Jewish purificatory water into wine, prefigures the passing of the Old Covenant before the New, with a miracle that symbolizes the central mystery of Eucharistic wine... Thus, the association of Mary with the Church through whom the sacrament of the Eucharist is granted, deepens (Warner 1983, 16).



Figure 2.1: Devotees praying at the Marian Grotto at Mariamabad

According to McBrien:

Faith in Mary's intercession with God was also promoted by the growing belief in her assumption, which solidifies the notion of her closeness with God. Germanus,¹⁴ patriarch of Constantinople, popularized the view that Mary had a maternal influence over God, that she could turn away God's anger and vengeance, supporting the idea that Mary appeases the wrath of God. Germanus believed that Mary is the people's Mediatrix with God (McBrien 1980, 873).

Most pilgrims in Mariamabad view Mary as a mediator between themselves and Jesus. She became important for spiritual redemption of the people in the Middle-Ages, and for some contemporary pilgrims of Mariamabad, Mary still plays a crucial role in their salvation.

¹⁴ (Orthodox Church in America n.d.) "Saint Germanus, Patriarch of Constantinople was born at Constantinople in the seventh century. His works include hymns in praise of the saints, discourses on the Feasts of the Entry into the Temple, the Annunciation and the Dormition of the Most Holy *Theotokos*.

According to Father Rochus O.P., “Mary is the source of our salvation and that is why we have great devotion for her” (Mehnga 2016). Likewise, Father Emmanuel Asi shared a few examples of the pilgrims’ devotional practices at Mariamabad. He talked about a group of young men who were heading towards Mariamabad on foot. They openly wore their rosaries and other religious symbols and travelled on foot for sixteen hours (Asi 2016). Father Asi revealed that some followers of Mary of Mariamabad travel for more than five days from the distant cities of Karachi and Peshawar by bicycles and on foot (Asi 2016).

In Father Asi’s experience, the Church does not teach unconventional devotional practices to the community nor should it (Asi 2016). He emphasized that modern religiosities should be granted a degree of freedom. The more the institution limits such devotional practices or promotes a single standard, the less uniqueness and beauty will exist (Asi 2016). According to Father Asi:

Any time when people express their devotion in an unconventional manner, it disturbs the institution, for instance during the pilgrimage, when I celebrate Eucharistic Mass in the Mariamabad Church, and people bring *دھول* *dhol*¹⁵ in the premises and start dancing, I am disturbed, but I remind myself that this is their form of veneration. They have come to express their love for their Mother Mary; thus, I continue with my work and let them continue with what they are doing (Asi 2016).

Similarly, Father Daniel O.P. reiterated that the ritualized devotional practices that take place during the three-day pilgrimage are not entirely Catholic. These practices are deeply colored by the native culture. He asserted that the practices deemed as non-Catholic are all forms of popular religiosities, and they are best understood as acceptable devotional activities in which

¹⁵ *Dhol* is a double-sided barrel drum played mostly as an accompanying instrument in regional music forms.

people pay respect to the “Co-Redemptrix” (M. Daniel 2016). Domenico Sartore defines popular religiosity as “a set of spiritual attitudes and cultic expressions which are connected with the liturgy” (Chupungco 1992, 100). His definition concurs with J. Evenou’s concept of popular religiosity as “a collection of behaviors and ritual practices that are more or less in harmony with the prescriptions of the hierarchic authorities” (Chupungco 1992, 100). Sartore believes that religiosity is a tangible form of a genuine religion, even if its expressions are at times lacking sound doctrine and ecclesiastical discipline (Chupungco 1992, 101).

The word “popular” is a description whereby religiosity is distinguished from the liturgy or an official form of worship. Depending on the region, certain liturgical celebrations, especially those that include rites rooted in popular tradition like the Palm Sunday procession and the veneration of the cross on Good Friday, do have a strong popular appeal, whereas some forms of popular religiosity, again depending on the region, may receive little or no interest from the people... The nature and form of popular religiosity are such that the ecclesiastical authority does not and cannot constantly exercise direct supervision over its manifold expressions (Chupungco 1992, 101).

Father Asi explained that in Mariamabad, the liturgical prayers and Catholic sacraments do not interest the masses as much as devotion through popular religiosity (Asi 2016). Devotion can be expressed as a form of votive offering in which a devotee may walk barefoot for several days towards Mariamabad shrine, crawl on their stomach (a practice which was banned this year at the annual pilgrimage), abstain from food, dedicate veils and scarfs, or dance for the Mother (Asi 2016).

Thus, just as some medieval Christians placed their unquestioning trust in the powers of Mary, the mother of Jesus, so do the contemporary pilgrims and devotees at the shrine of Mary at Mariamabad. Even though Mary is only mentioned occasionally in the New Testament, her

significance and appeal has given rise to popular religiosities surrounding her image. The image of Mary has embedded itself in the cultures of her devotees whose faith and trust in her power have evolved over the centuries.

Marina Warner argues, “Of the four declared dogmas about the Virgin Mary—her divine motherhood, her virginity, her immaculate conception, and her assumption into heaven, only the first can be unequivocally traced to Scripture, where Mary of Nazareth is undoubtedly the mother of Jesus” (Warner 1983, 19). Yet the reemergence of her character with greater consistency and vigor is an attribute of Mariology, which speaks to the early Church’s need to perhaps fill gaps in the life of Jesus Christ, or to address unanswered questions concerning the virgin mother of Jesus. Nevertheless, those efforts revealed the personas of Mary as a mother, as *theotokos* (the God bearer), and most importantly, as an intercessor between her son Jesus and her devotees. Considering the present devotional arena at the Marian shrine at Mariamabad or other centers of Marian devotions, such as the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico or the Basilica of Our Lady of Good Health in Velankanni in India, it is apparent that these locations address the need for a feminine symbol of veneration in the form of a powerful motherly figure. The image below represents an altar shrine of the Virgin Mary; it portrays, for the faithful, the strength of Mary, the mother of God, in all her glory.



Fig 2.3& 2.4: Shrine of the Virgin Mary ca. 1300. Made in Rhine Valley, Germany. Medieval art depicting a rare devotional shrine of Mary, when closed it is a statuette of the enthroned Virgin Mary nursing the infant Jesus. When opened, the shrine is transformed into an altar piece showing a sculptural representation of the Trinity.

High and Low Forms of Mariology: Mary of the Third World

Father Asi referred to the Mariology of Pakistan as *Third World Mariology* and called this persona of Mary the *Third World Mary*. This term led me to explore the relationship of this phenomenon with popular religious practices. Consequently, I encountered two paradoxical terms: *high* Mariology and *low* Mariology. Father Asi explained that he had organized many colloquiums in Mariamabad, including seminars on some far-reaching topics related to Third World Mariology.¹⁶ He explained that, from the theological perspective, high Mariology is practiced when all the Church doctrine is integrated and applied. It is about the excellence given to Mary as the mother of God. He simplified it by saying, “Practicing high Mariology is to look towards Mary” (Asi 2016). Within the realm of high Mariology, the focus is the reverence for Mary as the perpetual Virgin (Asi 2016). Low Mariology, on the other hand, is associated with the imitation of Mary’s action, that is, to emulate her virtues. This includes Mary’s life in the

¹⁶ According to Father Asi, he has written about and organizes various seminars on the issues of popular spirituality or folk spirituality, pilgrim spirituality, third world Mariology and *Third world’s Mary*.

domestic realm as a carpenter's wife in Nazareth and her relationship with relatives and strangers under Roman colonization (Asi 2016).

From the standpoint of the Marian shrine at Mariamabad, the clergy focuses on the topic of low Mariology more than high Mariology. Father Asi stressed that he does not deny the importance of the high form of Mariology but the context at Mariamabad is related to low Mariology; it is promoted as a pastoral need (Asi 2016). He explained:

Mary was a holy woman; she carried out the will of God; she ascended into Heaven –the Church institution agrees with and respects all these doctrines, but the Church cannot utilize them in the real world. We can only use these doctrines to strengthen our belief. On the other hand, we can emulate the way Mary struggled during her entire life (Asi 2016).

When I asked which kind of Mariology is practiced in Mariamabad, Father Asi replied that in Mariamabad, both high and low types of Mariology are practiced. He called this phenomenon a *collision* of both, and he described it as a fascinating occurrence. “It is a *Parallelism*,” he said. “What people do is the lower form of Mariology, especially the devotion, predominantly by the people who come from very far places. Whereas what occurs on the stage is the high Mariology” (Asi 2016). He continued to expound this notion of the combination of both types of Mariology by explaining that on every Marian shrine when there is a systematized feast, such as the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary celebrated on the eighth of December, both types of Mariology are observed (Asi 2016).

Catholicism has the remarkable ability to absorb different cultural practices within itself. Father Asi explained that the traditional practices are distinctive to the place where a religion is being practiced (Asi 2016). The methods of venerating Mary are not taught, whereas prayers are learned (Asi 2016). According to Father Asi, “expressing devotional acts through one's body

language is an internal trait that people acquire within their families or they self-learn; it is largely a personal motivation. The institution does not teach the people how to express their devotion. It can teach the sacraments, and it can emphasize the importance of the Eucharistic celebration, or when to stand or sit during the Mass, but the institution cannot and does not teach an adherent how to walk up the hill and kiss the statue of Mary, or crawl on the stomach to please Mary” (Asi 2016).

There is a sense of uniformity in the Catholic Ecclesia all over the world in terms of creed, devotion, doctrine, and sacraments. However, the difference lies in cultural attributes and manifestations and the diverse methods of paying homage. For example, at the Marian shrine at Mariamabad, some people are inspired by the prevailing Islamic culture, and others by Hindu forms of devotion. I discuss in detail the methods of veneration and devotional rituals performed by devotees in Chapter Five.

The Cult of Femininity

The topic of high versus low Mariology as explained by Father Asi leads to another significant facet of Mariology: the issue of feminism in so-called Third World countries. According to Warner, during the Middle-Ages, the social approval and religious taboo forced women in particular to cultivate the *virtues* of poverty and humility, which played a catalytic role in the debasement of feminine attributes, for example: obedience became submissiveness; kindness, indecisiveness; humility, cringing and patience, long-suffering (Warner 1983, 190-191). Marina Warner writes:

It is this very cult of the Virgin’s “femininity,” expressed by her sweetness, submissiveness and passivity that permits her to survive, a goddess in a patriarchal society. For her cult flourishes in countries where women rarely participate in public life

and are relegated to the domestic domain. In countries like Ireland, Spain, Portugal, Italy and Belgium, women are not rallying for comfort to a symbol that holds out hope of something different from their lives (Warner 1983, 190-191).

Father Rochus Mehnga O.P. shared that women and children significantly outnumber men during the three-day pilgrimage (Mehnga 2016). The majority belong to the lower middle-class population of the country. Mothers, wives and daughters emulate Mary at the Marian shrine at Mariamabad because her figure fits the societal socio-gender constructs. Anthropologist Mary Douglas writes:

If compensation theory were valid, the masses who experience control by objects would in reaction seek to differentiate more effectively. But instead they rush to adopt symbols of non-differentiation and so accentuate the condition from which they suffer. This is the dangerous backlash in symbolic experience of which we should beware. The man who has been raised up seeks symbols of his high estate; the one who has been degraded seeks symbols of debasement (Douglas 1973, 18).

Thus, Mary is primarily venerated in places where the representation of a subservient wife, or mother, or an obedient daughter applies more readily. Therefore, such socio-gender roles support and vindicate a higher authority in which women are expected to be and are men's devoted mothers and wives (Warner 1983, 190-191). The loyalty of the female devotees to the maternal symbolism of Mary at Mariamabad exhibits their dependence and conviction towards the empathetic, yet authoritative figure of Mary.

During the second day of the pilgrimage, I came across a woman whom I will call Sarah Mansoor; a Catholic pilgrim. She approached me as I was speaking to another devotee, assuming that I belonged to an international organization that provides aid. I explained to her that I am doing research at Mariamabad and asked her if she had a personal devotion to Mary. She shared

that her fourteen-year-old daughter was born with a mental abnormality. After her birth, the doctors told Sarah that her daughter would remain in this abnormal state; however, with the intervention of Mother Mary, her daughter is much better than before (Mansoor 2016). Although she is not entirely normal, she has started to speak, which she was unable to do previously. Sarah has been bringing her daughter to Mariamabad for the past ten years because she firmly believes that Mary, who is a mother just like her, and just as she is worried about her daughter, so did Mary worry for her Son, Jesus, will completely heal her daughter completely. During the festival, I met an eighty-four-year old woman who stood in the line of women waiting to kiss the statue of Mary and pray for less than a minute in front of it. From her appearance, it was clear that she had been exhausted from waiting for her turn to reach Mary's statue. When I asked her why she was there, she answered that her son is a drug addict. She was inspired to pray to Mary at the Mariamabad shrine because she believed that Mary would miraculously cure her son from his addiction. The identity of Mary as a devoted and selfless mother is an important symbol for her devotees, especially for women who through her can contextualize their own struggles.

In an interview with an educated Pakistani Catholic woman named Muriel, she offered a different perspective on Mary. I asked her if she believed that the figure of Mary in Mariamabad supports the normative female gender-roles within the culture. She responded with an interpretation of the story of the Annunciation. According to Muriel, in order to understand the devotional practices performed by the female pilgrims at Mariamabad, one must first understand this perspective on the Annunciation.¹⁷ In her interpretation of the Annunciation, Mary bowed to the will of God, not because she was docile but because she considered herself honored and privileged (Muriel 2016). Muriel continued, "In a culture where women are told to remain within

¹⁷ Luke 1:26–38. NRSV.

the boundaries of their homes for most of their lives—first in their parents’ house and then when they are married—they are expected to be silent and demonstrate obedience, Mary was chosen to be the mother of Christ” (Muriel 2016). Muriel believed that for the female devotees at Mariamabad, Mary exemplifies honor and resilience. Thus, to view her as an ordinary maiden in the hand of an all-powerful God takes away the reverence and recognition that she deserves for her role in the redemption.

Consequently, Mary as the epitome of obedience, servitude, and sacrifice fits the sensibilities of societies that view women within stereotypical gender roles. Mary’s obedience, which the low Mariology doctrine of the Church emphasizes, undermines the strength of Mary’s role as a powerful matriarch; an intercessor between the people and her Son. However, in an idiosyncratic sense, her character emerged as an amalgam of both power and passivity. Catholic devotees view her as a dependable symbol because of her role as a *theotokos*, and thus she is accorded honors similar to those conferred to divine figures. Yet, at the same time, they also form personal connections with her maternal attributes and social life. The presence of female devotees at Mariamabad represents more than devotion; it represents an empathetic relationship with a divine *helper*. Therefore, offering reverence to the figure of Mary is both unproblematic and cathartic for her devotees.

CHAPTER THREE

SACRED PHENOMENA IN MARIAMABAD

“Even while living in the world, the heart of Mary was so filled with motherly tenderness and compassion for men that no one ever suffered so much for their own pains, as Mary suffered for the pains of her children.”

—Saint Jerome

In this chapter I will examine the relationship of the sacred with the devotees; here, the word *sacred* describes Mary. The adherents share a sanctified relationship with their heavenly Mother. They faithfully make their way to Mariamabad each year even though the country faces political instability, security issues, and a deteriorating relationship with its neighbor country, India (Silva 2016). I am going to explore the necessity of veneration and the motivation of the devotees who put their trust in Mary. The topic of miracles, which is a significant part of the Marian devotion in Mariamabad, is also discussed. The expectation of miracle is one of the most important reason for the presence of pilgrims every year at Mariamabad. According to Father Asi, “if miracles never occurred at the Marian Shrine of Mariamabad, this place would turn arid” (Asi 2016).

Loyal Devotion

According to Durkheim’s famous definition of religion: “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church and all those who adhere to them” (Durkheim 1995). Focusing on Mariamabad, the *moral community* is the community of people belonging to different religious groups, for example, Christians, Muslims and some Hindus. Yet they are all connected through their personal religious devotion and their collective consciousness which binds them together as a community. Similarly, vernacular terms which have cultural roots also bind the devotees together. For example, the word mother *ماں* *ma*¹⁸, used together with the word *مریم* *Mary* is used by both Muslim and Christian devotees. According to Father Atif Younus O.P., “Just as Mary is the mother to all the Christians, she is a mother to the Muslims as well” (Younus 2016). He stated, “the word *ma* is commonly used for addressing any

¹⁸ *Ma* means Mother in Urdu.

elderly or respected woman in Pakistan, and other religious groups also call Mary *ma* because showing respect to mothers is part of our culture” (Younus 2016). The most consistent theme in the doctrine of Mary’s intercession is her motherhood; she is approached as a human mother who pours motherly love upon her devotees.

As Marina Warner elucidates:

She is approached as a human mother who brims over with a mother’s love. This element in her cult is present in earliest Byzantine times, recedes in the early Middle-Ages, when she is at her most queenly and hieratic, and then re-emerges in the thirteenth century, to last undiminished to the present day. Her love of mankind is maternal, and her qualities of mercy, gentleness, loving kindness, indulgence and forgiveness are all seen as motherly. All men are her children through Christ her son, who gave her to them from the Cross; and so, she lavishes a mother’s love and pity on all her brood (Warner 1983, 286).

I interviewed a Muslim woman, Naila Asim, who belonged to the Shia sect of Islam. She was childless for almost ten years of her marriage. She had seen many doctors and had gone through various medical procedures, but without any luck. Consequently, one of her Catholic friends shared with her about the miracles of Mariamabad. She went to Mariamabad, and prayed to *Ma Mariam*, and she conceived a boy within a year. Ever since that miracle occurred in her life, she has been a devotee of Mary of Mariamabad (Asim 2016).

At the shrine, praying to Mary and pleading for help to Mary occurs naturally. Often during the interviews, the Christian devotees at Mariamabad were heard to say that they “pray to Mary for their intentions because she is the mother of God.” Answering prayers is the major aspect of her myth because she mediates between heaven and earth (Warner 1983, 285). Mary belongs in both realms and she listens to the pleas of her adherent who “groan and weep in the valley of tears,” as is sung in the *Salve Regina* which promises to ease their pain with heavenly medicine

(Warner 1983, 285). Mary's role as a mediator between the people and her son is the primary focus during the three-day pilgrimage, and this is the time when the official doctrine detaches itself from the actual practices of veneration. Marina Warner writes:

The theology of the Virgin's intercession maintains strictly that the Virgin does not have the power to grant any boon by herself, but only intercedes with her son, who, as God, is the only source of salvation...The son can refuse his mother nothing. So, a prayer to Mary made in a spirit of repentance and resolve, can be wonder-working and men and women gathered together to pray to the Virgin sometimes forget the distinction between direct and indirect power (Warner 1983, 286).



Fig 3.1: Devotees waiting in a long line to pray and present their votive offerings at the grotto.

Devotional phenomena are the principal theme of the Marian festival, and although devotees are present in the form of a large religious community, their individual beliefs play a significant role in setting the Mariamabad Shrine apart from the profane realm. In Mariamabad, devotees from all around Pakistan are welcomed and their presence is strongly felt through their devotion and faith in Mary's mediating nature.

Marian Devotion – A Necessity of the People or the Desire of the Church?

Reflecting on the beauty of the historical background of Mariamabad, I could not help but ask Father Asi, “Why was Marian devotion necessary in the first place?” It is an explicit question, in need of a straightforward answer. Why was no other icon or figure selected by the missionaries when they came to this village and why was the image of Mary used as the symbol of Catholic devotion?¹⁹ Father Asi gave two reasons: the first is the *doctrinal* motive and the second is the *pastoral* reason for promoting Marian devotion. The doctrinal reason is that, when the dogma of Mary was proclaimed, the need for Marian devotion was felt by the Church, both in the institution and among the laity (Asi 2016). Because the first missionaries in that area of Punjab were from Belgium and they practiced Marian devotion, they promoted Marian piety through pilgrimage, festivals and prayers (such as the Rosary, *Salve Regina* and the *Alma Redemptoris Mater*)²⁰ (Asi 2016). Various hymns in honor of Mary were written during the missionary era of Catholicism during the British Raj. Therefore, Marian devotion was promoted as a movement to strengthen Catholicism. Significantly, it was also popularized as a defense mechanism in response to the growing Protestant missionary movements. Catechist P.D. Raphael preached on and composed numerous hymns in honor of Mary. As a result, Marian culture was given a boost through various pastoral efforts (Asi 2016).

According to Father Asi, when mass conversions took place in British colonized South Asian regions, many people from different religions converted to Christianity (Asi 2016). There was a tendency to select objects for veneration. The new converts did not always understand the implications of the minutiae of Catholic sacraments. Thomas Aquinas wrote, “The seven

¹⁹ It seemed to me as if the image of Mary was being used similarly to that of a village deity by the people of Mariamabad and the surrounding Christian villages.

²⁰ *Alma Redemptoris Mater* and *Salve Regina* are both eleventh century prayers pleading for help in obtaining God’s mercy through the intercession of Mary.

sacraments touch all the stages and all the important moments of Christian life because they give birth and increase healing and mission to the Christian's life of faith. Thus, there is a certain resemblance between the stages of natural life and the stages of the spiritual life" (Aquinas n.d.). However, for the newly converted, a deep understanding of theological language did not come about quickly. Furthermore, the missionaries observed that the new converts were born with a prior belief system that included cultural practices which shaped their identity.

Previous belief systems of the people which include belief in spiritual healers, natural elements (such as trees and other physical components) played a crucial role in their lives. Father Asi said that, "Such beliefs quenched their thirst for the attainment of miracles and benedictions from the divine. In order to meet the need for pastoral care, the missionaries wanted to promote Marian devotion so that the laity would request divine aid through Mary's intervention, rather than by performing non-Christian methods of veneration" (Asi 2016). Father Asi continued, "Devotion to Mary existed among the early Catholics of Punjab. These early Catholics recited rosaries and kept photos of Mary in their homes; however, devotion to Mary in the grotto hill unquestionably started through a pastoral need to encourage Marian piety" (Asi 2016).

Father Asi illustrated the faith of the adherents by relating an event that took place nearly fifty years ago. A Muslim woman from Khankah Dogran village, near Mariamabad, came to the Marian Shrine in a searing summer afternoon. In her arms she carried her toddler who was suffering from acute anemia. She placed the child on the foot of the hill of the Marian Shrine.²¹ She left the child on the bare ground facing the statue and prostrated herself to pray in front of the statue of Mary, saying, "If the Mother wills to heal my boy, he shall be cured but if it is not

²¹ According to Father Asi, five decades ago, the hill did not look the way it appears today; it was steeper and smaller than current Marian grotto. The hill and grotto of Mariamabad have undergone numerous renovations due to the constant flow of pilgrims throughout the years.

her desire to heal him, I will leave him here at her foot.” The child was cured that very moment and the woman gave her votive offering namely that for ten consecutive years she would bring her son to the shrine to perform سجده *sajdāh*²² at Mary’s grotto as a way of giving thanks (Asi 2016).

The peculiarity of the devotion at the Marian shrine of Mariamabad, explained Father Asi, lies in the fact that there is a significant presence of people who return to the shrine to give thanks or to offer their votive gifts when their requests are fulfilled through Mary’s intercession. As an example, among the most common type of votive offerings is to dedicate a veil to the statue of Mary as a symbol of respect. Devotees also offer candles, flowers, and incense at the grotto. Furthermore, many devotees intentionally add hardships on their journey and take a difficult path in order to present a votive offering or to please their figure of devotion. For example, many pilgrims return to the shrine every year to perform pilgrimage once their request has been fulfilled, or carry out various austere practices, such as fasting and walking barefoot.

Miracles of Mariamabad

The Catholic definition of miracle is “a wonder performed by supernatural power as a sign of some special mission or gift and explicitly ascribed to God” (Driscoll 1911). The Marian Shrine of Mariamabad is known among the Catholics and non-Christians of Pakistan for the supposed supernatural occurrences that take place through the intercession of Mary (Asi 2016). Before we discussed miracles in Mariamabad, Father Asi explained that *miracle* is a religious term—it has no place in the realm of science or the secular. Therefore, he believes that such occurrences must be understood from the perspective of the devotees who have experienced

²² To prostrate as a way of showing gratitude.

miracle (Asi 2016). According to Father Asi, “Many miracles have occurred in Mariamabad, and the people who experience miracles do not go to some medical lab to verify their healings, but rather they go home and tell their family and friends. They give دیگ *daig*²³ as a way of giving thanks” (Asi 2016). The belief in the miraculous powers of Mary has journeyed through the medieval period into contemporary times, exerting its influence on the understanding of Mariology. Belief in miracles through Mary and acts of popular religiosity have thus combined to create a devotion which is unique to each culture and tradition as represented in Mariamabad. According to Marina Warner:

In medieval miracle stories and paintings, in accordance with the iconodule’s belief, images and icons were constantly coming to life. In many the Virgin weeps, as she did in 1953 in Syracuse; a Saracen is converted when Mary’s breast becomes flesh and flows with oil. In a very popular tale, a woman begs the Virgin to spare her dying child, and to make sure she does so, seizes the Christ child from her arms as a hostage and only returns him to his mother on the recovery of her own child... In yet another miracle, the Virgin breaks out in sweat as she tries to restrain her son’s almighty and vengeful arm from striking a sinner down (Warner 1983, 293).

In Mariamabad, the statue of Mary embodies an all-powerful mother of God to the Christians, and a feminine icon of strength, mercy and persuasion to others. In the *Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary* (Anonymous 1587), which was composed during the Middle-Ages and is still actively recited at the Marian Shrine of Mariamabad during the annual pilgrimage, she is variously prayed to as the “Holy Mother of God,” “Mother of the divine grace,” “Virgin most powerful,” “Vessel of honor,” “Tower of David,” “Ark of the covenant,” and “Mother of the

²³ *Daig* is a large cauldron used to cook food such as rice or curry for distribution among the devotees.

Church.” Such attributions define her sacred relationship with the devotees, especially those that are present for her intercession.

Most of the pilgrims I interviewed hoped to receive some sort of divine intervention in their lives, and others were there to give thanks for their fulfilled personal intentions. Despite the long waiting in lines leading to the statue of Mary, the faith of the pilgrims was clearly manifested through their expression of devotion. A person named Iqbal Masih held his infant son in his arms and stood in the line for the devotees to pray in front of the statue. When I asked him why he had brought an infant with him in such heat, he replied that his child is a testimony that through Mary’s intercession the child was born (Masih 2016). He explained that from the time that he was married, he and his wife had been childless, but when they prayed at Mariamabad, God answered their prayers. Now, consequently, he wants to bring the child to Mary for her blessing (Masih 2016).



Fig 3.2: A devotee brings his child to the Mariamabad shrine as a vow fulfillment.

I also interviewed a person named Asher Nazir, who shared an experience that he considered miraculous. He had a reoccurring toe infection despite medication, but last year when he went to Mariamabad during the three-day pilgrimage, he was healed (Nazir 2016). He showed me his toe

and explained how troublesome the infection had been, and how much his family was concerned about his physical discomfort, but faith in Mary's intercession resulted in a miracle in his life.

I asked Father Asi if miracles have actually occurred in Mariamabad, or if this phenomenon is merely exaggerated by the devotees and the clergy. He replied, "I have a very different understanding of the word *miracle*. My theological standpoint differs when it comes to the theological definition of miracle; I would rather conceptualize it spiritually then technically."

Father Asi explained the religious phenomena through his personal perspective:

I believe that whether the miracle takes place or not is not significant. For me, having faith in Mary and Jesus is the biggest miracle. For example, when a person says that he or she is praying for a particular desire for ten years, and yet they continue to pray without losing hope—for me this is a miracle, to trust in God's power and timing instead of only wishing for worldly benefits (Asi 2016).

To clarify his point of view regarding miracles, he spoke about two spiritual trajectories taken from the Bible, one attributed to Jacob and the other ascribed to Job. "Jacob's trajectory focuses on the fact that if God grants me my favor I will do something for Him in return. Job's spiritual trajectory, on the other hand, focuses on God's will, whether or not he grants my desire, His will be done" (Asi 2016). As an example of miracle that had taken place in Mariamabad, Father Asi shared a personal experience. While he was a parish priest in Mariamabad, one of his aims was to promote the Marian shrine as a site of devotion, especially among the people that are not familiar with its history and background. He, therefore, told the domestic workers of the parish house that if they saw any strangers,²⁴ they should immediately send them to the parish house. Within the parish house, the clergy had arranged a guest room for the pilgrims.

²⁴ In the context of this section, the word "stranger" is an attribution to anyone who does not belong to Mariamabad village, particularly someone who is a non-Christian or from another city.

A family came to Mariamabad on a ٹانگا *tonga*²⁵ from Faisalabad, after travelling for almost two days. Father Asi asked them if they had any desire that they wanted to pray for since they travelled for miles to get to the shrine. One of the family members replied that they did not have any personal requests. In fact, they were at Mariamabad to make their horses prostrate in front of Mother Mary because through her intercession the two brothers were able to buy the horses to help support their livelihood (Asi 2016). That night, all four family members refused to sleep in the guest room where ceiling fans and beds were available, instead, they insisted on sleeping by the *feet* of the Mother, so that night they were permitted to sleep by the grotto (Asi 2016). This gesture was their way of showing gratitude to the Virgin Mary through whom they believed that they had received a blessing.

Father Asi shared another incident of Marian piety:

A person came to the shrine very early in the morning with his wife and infant child. From his physical appearance, it was quite evident that he was a Muslim. After the Mass, I invited them for breakfast in the parish house, and he said, “Do you know that we are Muslims?” I replied, “Yes I am aware.” And he said, “We came from Islamabad by taxi and we must go home by the same taxi; we are only here to offer سلام *salaam*²⁶ to Mary.”

²⁵ *Tonga* is a horse drawn carriage.

²⁶ *Salaam* is an Arabic word that literally means peace but it is also a common greeting word in Urdu language.



Fig 3.3: *Schutzmantel- Maria aus Ravensburg*, (woodcarving). Michael Erhart c. 1480.

Father Asi further explained that one must broaden the meaning of miracle in order to appreciate the diverse religious activities that take place at Mariamabad. “For me, a miracle is when a person belonging to another religion travels to Mariamabad from a far place, only to say *salaam* to Mary and not for any other purpose; it shows true devotion” (Asi 2016). To Father Asi, physical healing, getting a visa to a foreign country, or finding a job are examples of very elementary forms of miracles. For the devotees, fulfilment of their personal desires is important to them—that is the reason they have faith in the interceding powers of Mary. Father Asi also shared that a female doctor regularly visits Mariamabad to offer *salaam* to Mother Mary as a votive offering. She believed that she passed her medical entry-examination through the intercession of Mary, and was admitted to Bahawalpur University. Since then, she decided that she would go to Mariamabad every year to give thanks (Asi 2016).

It is thus evident that the statue of Mary represents, to the pilgrims, an image of a universal mother who listens to the pleas of her devotees. Through the eyes of her statue, she gazes upon eternity, transcending and transforming the troubles of the people nestling under her feet for

comfort (Cashford 1991, 556). As Anne Baring and Jules Cashford observe, the *Schutzmantel-Maria aus Ravensburg* signifies, “what is most relevant in any discussion of divinities: that all over the Catholic world statues of Mary are hung with gifts, not just jewelry and candles fit for a queen, but the personal mementos of gratitude for the birth of a child and the recovery from a frightening sickness” (Cashford 1991, 556). Similarly, Marina Warner writes, “images were alive, and so they could breathe life into the dying and Mary’s peculiar qualities of bodily and spiritual integrity made her the supreme medium of healing and rendering whole again, and her shrines have always been thronged since early Christian times” (Warner 1983, 293). During specific periods of the year, such as the annual pilgrimage in September and during other recognized Marian feasts, the Marian Shrine of Mariamabad is crowded with the presence of devotees. The statue thus becomes alive to its adherents who communicate with their heavenly Mediatrix (to Christians), or universal mother (to Muslims and Hindus), through the medium of prayer. Votive offerings, weeping and wailing, are some of the common forms of expression of faith to provoke her interceding power. The doors of the shrines are open for devotees of all religions. There is a time during the pilgrimage when people are invited on the center stage (where Church activities, such as Eucharistic celebration, take place). There they give testimonies of the miracles that they believe have blessed their lives through Mary’s intercession.

On the other hand, Father Asi explained that while the majority come for devotional purposes—which include asking for Mary’s intercession for their personal needs—there are some people who are only present for commercial reasons (Asi 2016). These vendors, whether Muslims or Christians, are a prominent feature of the ‘festival’ side of the pilgrimage. For example, they operate shops and restaurants, play areas for children, and circus. They are

generally not concerned about the pilgrimage or devotional activities. They are present to support the people who attend the three-day festival (Asi 2016).

CHAPTER FOUR

MARIAMABAD AND THE NON-CHRISTIAN DEVOTEES

“Then came the time when the angels said: ‘O Mary! Behold, Allah has chosen you, and made you pure, and exalted you above all the women in the world.’”

–Sūrat Al-Imran 3:42²⁷

²⁷ The Qur’ān, Sūrat Al-Imran 3:42. <https://quran.com/3>

Pakistan is a country where people from different religions reside, although the Muslim community is in the majority. Because Mary is also an important figure in Islam this chapter examines the relationship of Muslim devotees with the figure of Mary and how they perceive her. While conducting my research in Pakistan, I interviewed one of the renowned Islamic scholars of Pakistan, Mawlānā Abdul Khabir Azad. He is the خطيب *khaṭīb*²⁸ of the historic Badshahi Mosque, also known as the Imperial Mosque of Lahore. I spoke with him and another prominent Islamic scholar Mufti Mūeed Assad Ludhianwi from Toba Tek Singh district in Faisalabad, in order to form a more comprehensive as well as an etic perspective of Islamic piety at the Marian shrine at Mariamabad.

Mary is not simply mentioned in the Qur’ān, but an entire sūrat is named after her. According to sūrat Al-Imran 3:42, Mary (مريم *Maryām* in Arabic and Urdu) is chosen before all women by Allah, and she is glorified above all women in the world. Her significant presence in the Qur’ān reveals her theological significance in Islam.

People residing in the villages and cities near Mariamabad, whether Christian or Muslim, are aware of the devotional practices that take place within the premises of the Marian shrine. Muslims have a significant presence at the shrine, comprising approximately 10 to 15% of the devotees that visit the Marian shrine throughout the year (Asi 2016). Their attendance represents the inter-religious commonality that exists between the adherents of Christianity and Islam, often portrayed as at odds both in Pakistani and international media (Dhume 2016). Nevertheless, I do not deny the existence of religious persecution (Mohsin 2016) and sectarianism (Siddiqui 2016), which have overshadowed relations that are often peaceful. The shrine dedicated to Mary, a

²⁸ (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica 1998). *Khaṭīb* is a person who delivers a خطبة *khubtāh* (the sermon delivered especially at a Friday service, at the two major Islamic festivals (īds), at celebrations of saintly birthdays (mawlid), and on extraordinary occasions.

figure revered by both religions, provides an opportunity for both Christians and Muslims to glance into each other's beliefs and ritualistic practices and thus experience religious diversity.

Mary in the Qur'ān

In Christian theology, Mary's various idiosyncratic roles are acknowledged and celebrated by the Church and her devotees. She is the Mother of God and of the Church, and she is the Co-Redemptrix and a Mediatrix for those who seek her divine intercession. These are the explicit roles of the Virgin Mary that her followers, especially Catholics, have conscientiously recognized in their normative beliefs and devotional practices. She has, over the centuries, functioned (profoundly, even if quietly) as a bridge-builder to other traditions, cultures, and religions (Pelikan 1996, 67). Jaroslav Pelikan argues:

The general need for bridge builders has taken on a special urgency and poignancy in the attempt to understand the religion of the Prophet Muhammad and the message of the Qur'ān, concerning which the fundamental ignorance of otherwise well-educated Westerners is not only abysmal but frightening. The foundation of the Islamic faith came in a series of incandescent divine self-disclosure, beginning in about the year 610 A.D. and continuing to near the end of the Prophet's life in 632. These revelations are, to orthodox Muslim belief, the very voice of God. In them Muhammad was designated "a benevolence to the creatures of the world" whose message it was to say, "This is what has been revealed to me: 'Your God is one and only God.'" Muhammad memorized many of these sayings, as did a multitude of his followers; other sayings seem to have been written down right away, in whatever medium was at hand. The collecting of the Qur'ān is attributed to Abu Bakr, the first caliph, and the standard version to 'Uthman, the third caliph, who established the textual tradition at Medina as the normative one and who also

fixed the sequenced version of the 114 chapters, or sūrahs, more or less from the longest to the shortest (Pelikan 1996, 68).

Sūrah nineteen is named *Maryām*; Mary is the only woman in the Qur'ān to have a sūrah named after her, and it is also one of the longest. Three sūrahs in the Qur'ān have titles referencing various aspects related to the Christian tradition. Brother John Samaha S.M. argues that sūrats three, five and nine have a Christian context: *The Family of Imran*, since Imran in Islam is the name of Mary's father, *The Holy Table*, as it recalls Jesus's miracles, and *Mary*, which features its namesake (Samaha n.d.). In general, sūrah nineteen focuses on two particular events in Mary's life: her birth and her time in the temple (Samaha n.d.). These two events are also the main focus of the apocryphal text attributed to James, the Apostle of Jesus, known as the *Protoevangelium of James*. Sūrat Al-Imran 3:42 states, "The angels said: O Mary! Allah has chosen thee and made thee pure and has preferred thee above all women of creation" (Sūrat Al-Imran 3:42). The Qur'ān clearly states that Mary was born without sin, and that Jesus, her son, was born of a woman who had no relations with a man (Samaha n.d.).

Thus, Mary occupies an important place in the Qur'ān which inspires the followers of Islam to venerate her. In the 9th century, Bartholomew of Edessa wrote, "In the entire Qur'ān there do not occur any praises of Muhammad or his mother Aminah, such as are found about our Lord Jesus Christ and about the Holy Virgin Mary, the *Theotokos*" (Pelikan 1996, 77). Norman Daniel writes, "There is nothing else in all the Qur'ān to parallel the warmth with which Christ and His mother are spoken of. Christ is presented as a unique being, but his mother's personality appears more vividly. The Qur'ān inspires a devotion to Mary of which Muslims might have made more" (N. Daniel 1960, 175). The Muslim devotees of Mariamabad come to the Marian shrine according to their personal religious understanding to express their respect to Mary. Although there is a clear distinction between Islam and Christianity on numerous issues—such

as the belief in the Holy Trinity and understanding of Mary as a God-bearer or Mother of God—at Mariamabad the adherents of both faiths are bound together with a fragile thread of devotion and reverence to the Virgin Mary.

From the Lens of Islamic Scholars

Mawlānā Abdul Khabir Azad understands perhaps better than anyone the devotion Muslims show to Mary of Mariamabad. Apart from being a renowned scholar of Islam, he and Father James Channan O.P. relentlessly promote interfaith dialogue in Pakistan. On September 6th, 2016, I went to interview him and he welcomed me with the most courteous hospitality. He shared that respect for all the prophets and messengers, including Jesus and Mary, is part of their religious creed (Azad 2016). He emphasized, “Even disrespecting the shoe lace of the Prophet Īsā is forbidden for us. Likewise, the respect of Bibi Maryām is just as important as the respect of her Son” (Azad 2016). When speaking of Muslim devotion to Mary by a Muslim in a Catholic shrine in Pakistan, he said:

Just how Christians look at her as a symbol of a motherly figure, so do we Muslims think of her as a mother, she is a holy woman; Allah within the Qur’ān itself gives the testimony of her purity. The justification regarding her purity and sinless nature is presented in such a magnificent manner that Allah revealed *āyāts* (verses) in her defense to His Beloved Prophet Muhammad. So, one can imagine how great and pious a woman was Bibi Maryām” (Azad 2016).

Azad elaborated Mary’s role in Islam by emphasizing her role as the mother of a prophet. He stressed, “Jesus is a *nabī* (prophet) and a *rasūl* (messenger) to whom Allah gave the gift of performing miracles. When he wanted to raise a dead person to life, he only had to say, “Get up in the name of Allah.” Mary is the mother of that great prophet. So, her respect and place in

Islam is very high, and there is no greater woman than she” (Azad 2016). He reiterated that an entire surah (*Maryām*) is dedicated to her and that the entire Islamic *ummah* (community) along with Christians respect her status (Azad 2016).

I asked Azad if the pilgrimage sites such as the Marian Shrine of Mary at Mariamabad play any role in building positive interfaith relationships between communities of different religions and also if he encourages a *pilgrimatic*²⁹ form of devotion. In his opinion, the devotional phenomenon that occurs in the famous Sufi pilgrimage sites of Pakistan, such as the Shrine of Hazrat Data Gunj Buksh and of Baba Farid Gunj Shakar, is similar to the popular veneration that takes place at the Marian Shrine of Mariamabad (Azad 2016). He believes that the devotees express their devotion and respect to the holy men and women of Allah at the Sufi shrines.

Azad explained the importance of the religious shrines, “If you look at the historic rulers or politicians, they have ruled countries and governments, but the people who are the *Walī-Allah*³⁰ are the folks that have throughout the ages ruled over the hearts of humanity. One may ask why. It is because of the significant role they play in helping others cleanse and change their hearts” (Azad 2016). He shared a folktale about a *muridani*³¹ attributed to Khawaja Fariduddin Masud Ganjshakar, popularly known as Baba Farid or Shaikh Farid. He continued:

A *Muridani* once told Baba Farid that she desired to present him a gift. Baba Farid replied that a *faqīr*³² does not accept gifts. The *muridani* said, “But the Beloved Prophet

²⁹ (English Oxford Living Dictionaries). According to the Oxford dictionary, “*pilgrimatic* refers to a characteristic of or belonging to a pilgrim; of or relating to pilgrims or pilgrimages.” I use the word “Pilgrimatic devotion” to define the phenomenon in which pilgrims gather at a site which is affiliated to a religious/holy men or women and offer their prayers and votive offerings.

³⁰ *Walī-Allah* means saint or a friend of Allah.

³¹ *Muridani* is a female follower of a *pir*.

³² (The Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica 2009). “*Faqīr* (poor), originally, a mendicant. In mystical usage, the word *fakir* (*faqīr*) refers to man’s spiritual need for God, who alone is self-sufficient. Although of Muslim origin, the term has come to be applied in India to Hindus as well, largely replacing *gosvāmin*, *sadhu*, *bhikku*, and other designation.”

Muhammad accepted gifts, so, why don't you?" Because of her insistence, Baba Jee agreed and she brought him a pair of scissors as a gift. Baba Jee refused to accept the gift of scissors. The next day, she gave him a needle, which he happily accepted. The woman was confused and asked Baba Farid the reason for accepting the gift of a needle and refusing the pair of scissors. The holy man replied, "Child, scissors are used to cut and slash, while a needle is used to stitch and mend. Likewise, the work of the Sufi is to attach and not to break" (Azad 2016).

Azad added that the saints and pious individuals bridge the gap between the divine and the people. Therefore, the religious shrines of holy men and women, share that significance, although he explained that the devotion should not be interpreted as a practice of seeking favor directly from a saint (Azad 2016). He stated, "People cannot ask for favors and boons from the saints, because there is only one benevolent provider in this world and that is Allah.

Nevertheless, devotees must go to the religious shrines to show devotion to the holy men and women of God, to express their love and reverence and to pray for the saint's soul" (Azad 2016). He further explained that the shrine dedicated to Mary is a locale of pure devotion. When people travel to a religious shrine, barefoot or express their affection for their religious icon in ways such as fasting and prostration, it indicates their sincere piety (Azad 2016).

Devotion Amidst Compulsion

My conversation with the Islamic scholars on the topic of Marian devotion among Muslim devotees took place in the midst of the national discourse on interfaith conflict. Sporadic disturbances caused by religious xenophobia and lack of empathy for the *other* has raised

concerns among the religious leaders of different religious groups in Pakistan. The Muslim scholars whom I interviewed made it clear through their responses; they play a role in promoting peace between Christian and Muslim communities in the regions where they have influence.

Mufti Mūeed Assad Ludhianwi is the khaṭīb of the mosque *Jamia Masjid-e-Usmania* in Toba Tek Singh district in Punjab province. He was informed in advance about the nature and the context of our interview, yet he opened the conversation by referring to a dark page from the recent history of Pakistan.³³ On August 1st, 2009, in Gojra *tehsil* (subdivision) in the Toba Tek Singh district, seven Christians were lynched because of allegations that they had defiled pages from the Qur’ān (The Associated Press 2009). He emphasized that when the incident occurred, he requested the then local government councilor of the area, Mr. Zaman Cheema, to be granted permission to visit the aggrieved area. The councilor resisted, saying that the people in the village of Gojra were so deeply wounded following the incident that they might burn him (Ludhianwi 2016). Yet, out of compassion, he insisted upon visiting the village to express his condolences to the community. He stressed that although he is not affiliated with any non-governmental organization or with the government, he immediately arranged for medicines, approximately one hundred bottles of blood, and food for the people who were in the hospital (Ludhianwi 2016). With a smile on his face, he explained, “Till this day, all the Christians from that village meet me with great happiness. And one person asked me, what is your relationship with the Christians? I told him that the Prophet Muhammad said, ‘Īsā is my brother’ (Ludhianwi

³³ The topic of inter-religious dialogue might seem like it deviates from the primary focus of analyzing the spiritual and devotional practices in Mariamabad, but I realized that it is almost impossible to explore and appreciate the significance of the Marian shrine without acknowledging the efforts of individuals that are promoting, or at least recognizing the value of interfaith dialogue and harmony.

2016).³⁴ If the Prophet Mohammad himself has said this, then we Muslims also share a bond with Christians” (Ludhianwi 2016).

When the annual pilgrimage to the Marian Shrine of Mariamabad is near, many Christians from different parts of Pakistan make their way to Mariamabad village by various modes of transportation. There is an unusual, sporadic sighting of pilgrims throughout the major cities of Punjab, especially in the city of Lahore. These pilgrims pass through barefoot in small processions during the pilgrimage time. They are occasionally accompanied by young men in bicycle groups. As mentioned in the previous chapters, travelling by foot for several days as a devotional practice is an expression of popular religiosity, and from a cultural standpoint, it represents a gesture of respect and devotion to Mary. When I passed by one of the main roads in city of Lahore, the intermittent religious processions were distinguishable among the various distractions of the city. I had a conversation with such a group of pilgrims travelling from Kasur, who still had a couple of days before they would reach Mariamabad. When I asked them why they chose the austere transport of walking and bicycling, they responded that they were doing this for the love of “Mother Mary” (Pilgrims 2016). The mode of travel towards the pilgrimage destination is a matter of choice, since many choose a more comfortable means of transportation, while others endure discomfort in order to attain spiritual satisfaction.

Mufti Ludhianwi shared his experience witnessing men and women walking in processions and riding bicycles towards Mariamabad. He shared that, “These people, predominantly men, openly exhibited their religious symbols, such as rosary and cross. They had also decorated the

³⁴ Book 30, Chapter 37 Hadith Number 5836. Recorded by Abu Huraira who reported many hadiths from the Prophet Mohammad and one is that, “Allah’s Messenger (may peace be upon him) said: I am most close to Jesus, son of Mary, among the whole of mankind in this worldly life and the next life. They said: Allah’s Messenger, how is it? There upon he said: Prophets are brothers in faith, having different mothers. Their religion is, however, one and there is no Apostle between us (between I and Jesus Christ).” <http://sunnah.com/muslim/43/190>

religious signs on their chests and foreheads and on their bicycles and rickshaws. They also shouted religious slogans” (Ludhianwi 2016). He described the entire episode of religious manifestation as ‘phenomenal’ and as ‘a sign of religious harmony and brotherhood.’ At many places where he and his companions saw such groups of pilgrims, they would stop their cars and waved at them as a gesture of affirmation, encouragement, and simply to welcome them (Ludhianwi 2016). According to Mufti Ludhianwi:

One or two bicycles came in front of our car and asked us who we were, and I replied to them in Punjabi, “We are also your brothers.” I asked them where they were heading and they replied, “We are going to Mariamabad to pray, not only for us, but for all the citizens of this country and for peace.” So, I told them, “You filled my heart with joy.”

One of the young males within the group of the bicyclers shared with me that he was travelling from Kabirwala and that he left the house before sunrise (Ludhianwi 2016).

Mufti Ludhianwi observed that people who go to the Marian shrine of Mariamabad seek spiritual peace in their hearts through expressing their devotion to Hazrat Maryām (Ludhianwi 2016). He shared, “Today people crave for internal reconciliation, they just cannot experience the relationship with the Divine inside their personal surroundings and home.”

Likewise, the Mufti had also experienced the religious exuberance at Mariamabad where he spent about eight hours. He revealed that he shares the spiritual experience at the Marian shrine with his audience at the mosque while giving *khutbāh*³⁵ or at religious processions (Ludhianwi 2016). He believes that one can find internal harmony among people that speak about the Divine and help others to build a relationship with the Divine (Ludhianwi 2016). While expounding upon Mary’s role and status in Islam, he noted that in addition to being the most pious woman, Hazrat Maryām gained a special favor from Allah. He explained:

³⁵ *Khutbāh* is the sermon, especially those delivered at a Friday service.

After completing the earthly life, we Muslims believe that every human soul will leave the earth naked, but among women, Hazrat Maryām is the only one who will be taken to heaven in her clothes. Allah, to protect her purity, has given her this privilege that no other person is entitled to. This encapsulates the importance of Mary within Islam, that in this world no one shall raise a finger against her character, and on the day of judgement, she must be the purest among all human beings (Ludhianwi 2016).

The prominence of Mary's piety dates to Muhammad, as noted by D. Longhurst, "Muhammad placed Mary above all women, even his daughter Fatimah by saying that Fatimah would have been highest among women were it not for Mary" (cf. Musnad by Ibn Hanbal) (Longhurst 2012). One of the most unusual comments that came from a non-Christian religious scholar about admiration of Mary, concerning her role as a mother, is shown below. However, I believe that this precise perspective on Mary should be placed in the cultural context of South Asia. Mufti Ludhianwi explained:

Any conversation about Jesus is incomplete without the mention of His mother. One may wonder what must be the charm or significance of Mary's character as a mother that Allah decided to give her the privilege of being a mother to a *nabī* (prophet). That truthfulness, congeniality, piety and wisdom, that already existed in the personality of the mother, became ten times more visible in the character of her son Jesus. A great prophet was raised in her lap. Who is more exalted than she? (Ludhianwi 2016).

It is no wonder that within Islamic tradition Jesus is often known through his mother and is addressed as, *Īsā ibn Maryām* which means, "Jesus son of Mary." Thus, reverence for Mary is particularly visible when displayed by a non-Christian devotee.

Marian Devotion among Hindus and Sikhs

According to Father Asi, there are not many Hindus in Punjab. Their presence is more prominent in Sindh and towards the Indian borders that connect with Sindh. Even when they are present at the pilgrimage site, it is still difficult to distinguish them from Catholic or Muslim devotees. Father Asi explained that Hinduism is a diverse religion that fosters belief in gods and goddesses for different purposes, so that being a devotee of Mary is the same as being a devotee of any other deity (Asi 2016). In that sense, Hinduism absorbs Marian devotion into its own tradition. Speaking of the Sikh devotees, Father Asi mentioned that he has not encountered any Sikh devotee at Mariamabad. However, he added, “In the year 1993, the pilgrimage committee at Mariamabad planned to initiate a project to build water tanks in Mariamabad to provide drinking water for the pilgrims. The organizing committee decided that they would write the names of the persons who donated to help supply water tank as a gesture of gratitude” (Asi 2016). Surprisingly, Father Asi received a donation of two-hundred and fifty British pounds from a Sikh family. They donated the money to purchase five water tanks, but at the same time they specifically requested that their names not be written on the tanks (Asi 2016).

Thus, the shrine of Mary at Mariamabad has created a unique setting in which disparate religious groups are able to coexist peacefully and connect with the numinous from their own perspective. This belief system diverges from the Western form of Catholicism in the way that its rituals and devotional elements incorporate the traditional cultural practices of the local population and thus present themselves in the forms of popular religiosities. At the same time, it also promotes inter-religious harmony among the people who divide themselves by religion and creed. Although devotees representing different religious faiths at Mariamabad view Mary from their personal religious standpoints, the sacred space and the spiritual atmosphere of the shrine

provides an environment where they co-exist amidst the many sectarian and religious conflicts that periodically shake the peace of the country.

CHAPTER FIVE
RITUALS AND DEVOTIONAL FORMS

“The progressive secularization of modern man has altered the content of his spiritual life, but not broken the mould of his imagination; a huge residue of mythology lingers in the zones that have escaped regimentation.”

—Mircea Eliade

This chapter examines the different popular religious motifs incorporated in the Catholic space of worship at the Marian Shrine of Mariamabad. People enter the realm of devotion through their cultural understanding. Glimpses of local values appear in the rituals and devotional elements performed at the shrine. The unique amalgam of local culture, tradition and religion distinguish this Marian shrine from others. In this chapter I compare the devotional practices that take place at Mariamabad with those that take place at various Sufi shrines in Pakistan. I visited two famous Sufi shrines in Lahore: The Shrine of Hazrat Data Gunj Baksh and the Atari Darbar Shrine. This comparison does not simply present observations, but analyzes how the practices merge, creating a unique form of worship, and what these practices represent to the members of both Muslim and Christian faiths. Also, the terms employed in this chapter mirror the vernacular terms used by Catholic devotees at Mariamabad. I asked Father Asi about the merging of Catholic rituals with the vernacular devotional practices and if he thought this ritualistic syncretism should be promoted by the Church. His reply was straightforward:

To those who oppose the devotional blend at Mariamabad and think that this phenomenon is profane, I tell them that if they want to practice Catholicism in a strict sense or if they want to participate in only Catholic forms of devotion, then they should go to their local Catholic Churches and not come to Mariamabad. This [Mariamabad] is a place to offer *dupatta*, *chador*, and other votive offerings. Here, young men crawl towards the Mariam grotto upon their bellies! I have seen many people engage in this austere form of devotion and I have asked them, “Why are you hurting yourself in this way?” and they just say, “We want to make the Mother happy.” Here people dance for Mother Mary... and I am not talking about the commercial dance forms such as disco or ballet. I am speaking of *dhamāl*, which is a transcendental form of devotion (Asi 2016).

Father Asi later asserted that Catholic principles and pilgrimage spirituality are two entirely dissimilar phenomena, thus the institutional side of the shrine must not be disturbed by occurrences of the popular spirituality during the annual Marian festival (Asi 2016). However, during the three-day festival, both institutional and popular spiritual experiences are inseparable.

Festival and Pilgrimage (Mela and Ziyārat-e-Mariamabad)

Mariamabad ka Mela means the festival of Mariamabad. ميلا *mela* is a kind of communal gathering or a festival and in the Indian subcontinent it describes a carnival like ambiance. During the three-day pilgrimage, the atmosphere resembles a celebration with village and city business vendors, swings for children and food kiosks. Christian religious booths sell mementoes such as rosaries, bracelets, crosses, Marian statues, and holy water outside the Church premises in the “fair” part of the pilgrimage. Objects used as votive offering and dedication such as veils, incense, fresh flowers and candles are also sold outside the shrine premises.

The pilgrimage site is commonly called “*Mariamabad ka mela*” by a majority of devotees. According to Father Asi, although the pilgrimage site was always and is still called *mela*, the sacred site’s association with the word pilgrimage came much later. He shared that the Catholic Church popularized the word pilgrimage within the last three decades because the leaders found the term *mela* too secular to describe such a sacred site (Asi 2016). Thus, to distinguish the shrine from the non-religious domain and to give it a more spiritual implication, the word *ziyārat* was introduced in 1974, which translates as “pilgrimage” (Asi 2016). The shrine of Mariamabad is known as *Ziyārat-e-Mariam*, which literally means “visiting Mary”. It is an Arabic word which basically means *visit* and, from the Islamic perspective, refers to a form of pilgrimage to sites associated with the Prophet Muhammad including his family members and descendants, his

companions, and other venerated figures in Islam, such as the prophets, Sufi saints, and Islamic scholars (Frembgen 2008, 35). Within Islam, sites of pilgrimage include mosques, graves, battlefields, mountains, and caves. (Frembgen 2008, 35).

At the Marian Shrine of Mariamabad, the devotees experience the encounter with the *wholly other*, which, in this case, is Mary. Thus, it is considered a site of great reverence and importance for its followers. Although the word *ziyārat* has an Islamic association, the Catholic devotees at Mariamabad, use it to express their reverence for the sacred place and as a symbol of assimilation and integration of the Catholic belief system with the predominant Islamic culture of Pakistan. Therefore, many Arabic terms are borrowed to satisfy the cultural requirements of the land.



Fig 5.1: Pictures taken during the three-day Marian pilgrimage.

Votive Offerings; Mannat, Shukar-guzari and Nazrana

In the previous chapters, I have discussed the concept of votive offering as a ritual performed by the devotees at Mariamabad, but in this section the focus is on its significance as a common practice also observed at Sufi shrines. The term *votive offerings* can be divided into: 1) things offered to God or the saints during the time of trouble or crisis and 2) things offered in gratitude for a recovery or deliverance not promised previously (Bede 1912). In the Sufi shrines, this practice is referred to as *mannat* which means ‘to beg’ or ‘to ask’ (Batoool, et al. 2015), while the devotees at Mariamabad use the word *shukar-guzari* to define such offerings along with *mannat*. *Shukar-guzari* means to give thanks in a form of offering and is performed when a *mannat* is fulfilled. *Mannat* is performed in a variety of ways, such as fasting, remaining barefoot during the pilgrimage, walking barefoot to the shrine, lighting candles, burning incense, and offering veils to the statue of Mary. Devotees also give financial offerings, provide free food to the pilgrims or donate money to the clergy.

At the Sufi shrine of Hazrat Bari Imam in Islamabad, devotees perform *mannat* because they believe that Hazrat Bari Imam is close to Allah and can advocate before Him on their behalf (Batoool, et al. 2015). When the desire is fulfilled, devotees present various offerings at the shrines depending on their socio-economic circumstances including but not limited to: animals, money, gold, sweets, *daig*³⁶ of food, milk, ghee, pitcher (*gharolies*), flowers and headdress (*sehra*) to express gratitude and love for the buried Sufi and Allah (Boivin 2015, 38). At Sufi shrine, after fulfilment of any desire, the devotees express their gratitude by presenting *nazrana*, an offering or donation of money as part of a religious devotion, a common practice after the completion of the *mannat* (Boivin 2015, 35). Similarly, the word *nazarana* is also used by the

³⁶ A large cauldron used to cook food for the devotees.

Christians to describe the offerings one makes in the Church, or at the Marian shrine. At Mariamabad, when the intention is fulfilled after keeping a *mannat*, the devotee presents a form of *shukar-guzari* depending on the kind of votive offering he or she promised. In the research by Batool et al. at the shrine of Hazrat Bari Imam while studying devotee's perception of *mannat*, the researchers found out that the meaning of *mannat* is multidimensional (Batool, et al. 2015). They stated:

Mannat has been believed to be a promise, while some held it as a transaction between a person and a deity, to render some services or gift. It was observed that *mannat* is considered a humble request (*minnat*) or prayer of a person at the shrine to get some material or non-material favor which he or she cannot easily receive from God through that person's own name, as he or she is a sinner. Thus, when the prayer is not answered directly, people march towards sacred places and pious people such as the saints (Batool, et al. 2015).



Fig 5.2: Devotees at the Atari Darbar of Mehmood Chishti in Lahore are making an offering to the Sufi saint to advocate their desires before Allah.

At the shrine of a Sufi saint, devotees not only come for material needs but also for spiritual healing (*faiz* and *nigah*) (Batoool, et al. 2015). However, the terms *faiz* and *nigah* are not used by the Catholic devotees at the Marian shrine of Mariamabad.

Incense, Candles and Veils

During the three-day pilgrimage and all around the year, devotees at the Marian shrine venerate Mary by using incense. The strong fragrances from the incense permeate the grotto and surrounding area. The ritual of burning incense is performed by the devotees at Mariamabad to request Mary to intercede on their behalf with God. Incense is also an important part of Catholic liturgical rituals. Herrera writes:

The earliest documented history of using incense during a Catholic sacrificial liturgy comes from the Eastern side of the Church. The rituals of the Divine Liturgies of Saint James and Saint Mark date from the 5th century include the use of incense. On the Western side of the Church the *Ordo Romanus* VIII of Saint Amand of the 7th century mentions the use of incense during the procession of a Bishop to the altar on Good Friday. Documented history of incensing the Evangeliary (Book of Gospels) during the Mass dates from the 11th century. The use of incense within the liturgies continued to be developed over many years into what we are familiar with today (Herrera 2011).

During the pilgrimage, the incense is offered by the devotees, largely in the form of incense sticks. Incense are burned near the grotto in the designated area. According to one of the devotees, the aroma of the incense carries the prayers and implorations of the people up to heaven where Mary resides with her son Jesus Christ (Muriel 2016).

Apart from incense, devotees express their devotion and make votive offerings by lighting candles at the grotto. Pilgrims light candles when they present their personal desires to Mary through prayer. Offering candles to religious figures is a common devotional element within Catholicism. In the Catholic tradition as in many religions, light has always held a special significance. In the Gospel of John, 8:12 and 12:46, Jesus, says, “I am the light of the world. No follower of Mine shall ever walk in darkness; no, he shall possess the light of life” and “I have come to the world as its light, to keep anyone who believes in Me from remaining in the dark.”³⁷ According to Father Saunders, “Christians adapted the use of candles for Mass, liturgical processions, evening prayer ceremonies, funeral, processions, and to show reverence to the reserved Blessed Sacrament” (Saunders 1994).



Fig 5.3: Devotees offering candles and incense near the Marian grotto.

³⁷ John Chapter 8:12 and 12:46. NRSV.



Fig 5.4: Devotees at Mariamabad bring decorative chadors to present at the shrine.

According to Father Asi, candles are lit continuously during the pilgrimage days, and often times the veils hanging on the grotto hill catch fire (Asi 2016). Fortunately, no life-threatening incidents have occurred during the annual festival, since the pilgrimage volunteers respond quickly. However, during my recent visit to the annual Marian pilgrimage in September 2016, I observed that the pilgrims and devotees were not permitted to light candles and burn incense anywhere near the statue of Mary or the grotto; a separate area behind the grotto hill was designated for the people who wished to light candles or incense.

Another devotional ritual performed at Mariamabad is the presenting of veils (*chador* or *dupatta*) to Mary's statue as a votive offering or as an act of reverence. The Persian word *chador* means 'fabric for a veil' or 'to cover.' Decorative veils are carried by procession of devotees and then presented to the statue of Mary. Devotees also bring *dupatta* (long head scarf) as an offering once their intention is fulfilled or as a votive offering for fulfillment of their desire. Similar rituals are also observed at the Sufi shrines in Pakistan. For example, people bring decorated shrouds (*chador*) to cover the grave of the Sufi saint as a representation of reverence and

devotion. At the *urs*,³⁸ the act of offering a *chador* is significant and most people either bring a *chador* from their native city or purchase one from local shopping markets (Mokhtar 2012).

According to Shehram Mokhtar:

During the *urs* of Lal Shehbaz Qalandar, Cheema and his group brought one big red *chador* which they put on display in one of the houses rented by them for three days, before taking it to the shrine and offering it there. Some of them spend thousands on the decoration of the *chador*. These shrouds are inscribed with verses from the Quran or poetry and praise for the Prophet Muhammad, Ali, and Lal Shahbaz Qalandar along with beautiful decorative patterns and shapes. Some of these *chadors* are made of gold threads. The ritual is to take *chador* through the narrow lanes of the city, held by the people of the group before offering it at the shrine (Mokhtar 2012).

Presenting *chador* is a form of popular religiosity practiced by both Christian and Muslim devotees at Mariamabad and the local Catholic community's adoption of this ritual signifies an instance of syncretism between the religious groups.



Fig 5.5: Two Poles near the shrine, covered with the Holy Cloth; *Chador*.
Google Image.

³⁸ (Boivin 2015, 326). “*Urs*: From the Arabic word meaning nuptials; it refers the annual fair commemorating the death of a Sufi saint. The death is interpreted in a symbolic way as the wedding of the Sufi with God. The duration of the *urs* varies, however most are three days in length.”

During the three-day annual pilgrimage, the festival volunteers remove the *dupattas* and *chadors* from the grotto and from the statue of Mary about every ten to fifteen minutes, since the devotees continuously keep covering the statue with such offerings (Asi 2016). Not simply her statue and the grotto area, but two poles across the shrine are also covered with the offered veils by the often-enthusiastic devotees.

Dhamāl

The performance of *دھمال dhamāl* is a prominent part of the devotional ritual at the shrine of Mary. *Dhamāl* is a mystical dance and ritual practice performed at several shrines of Pakistan by the devotees of Sufi saints (Frembgen 2012). In the Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi, and Gujarati languages, *dhamāl* means wild, energetic and over-excited; however, Frembgen describes it as a “dance guided by the hypnotic repetitive sound of drums—a concrete devotional practice of rural people and the urban poor, especially in Sindh and Punjab” (Frembgen 2012). He argues:

The genre of instrumental *dhamāl* is a different kind of Sufi activity mostly practiced outside institutionalized Sufi orders thus, it is specifically associated with the dervishes and devotees of the *Qalandar* movement in Muslim South Asia –as a radical, provocative, but also ascetic way of life which rejects the social values and the formalism of the external world and instead strives for a state of religious rapture, abandonment and ecstasy (Frembgen 2012).

At Mariamabad, male devotees at the shrine perform *dhamāl* on the beat of the *dhol*. In one form of *dhamāl*, the male devotee jumps with arms raised and index fingers pointed in the air. (Boivin 2015, 130). In Mariamabad, the efficacy of *dhamāl* is evident when both Christian and Muslim devotees perform *dhamāl* communally.

The Catholic clergy at Mariamabad neither promotes nor condemns this act of devotion, since the devotees who perform *dhamāl* do so to please and honor their figure of devotion—Mary. The transference of this form of devotion within a Catholic spiritual space suggests that, in this case, cultural practices transcend the boundaries of religion. Thus, *dhamāl* became a part of the accepted practice within local Catholics who consider it an acceptable display of popular religiosity. Nevertheless, it is also one of the most prominent ritualistic features at any Sufi shrine in Pakistan. However, the supporters of legalistic Islam oppose *dhamāl*. Frembgén argues:

The Sufi devotion in Pakistan belongs to a pluralistic indigenous system of values shared by the common people as well as the elite. Its tangible embodiment in the spectacular and vibrant ritual action of *dhamāl*, however, is contested by Muslim theologians and followers of scriptural and legalistic Islam who reject dance (*raqs*), condemning it as “un-Islamic practice,” nevertheless as an expression of local ecstatic ‘danced religion’ in the public sphere it belongs to the multiple worlds of shrines of Sufi saints. Thus, for all performers of *dhamāl*, it is a celebrative form of interaction with the beloved saint expressing a temporal coexistence between this world and the divine (Frembgén 2012).

Nevertheless, some individuals at the Marian shrine are only there to enjoy the spiritual ambiance of the festival. Although some of the men dance in spiritual trance, others dance without having a religious experience. Thus, these men liberate themselves from the conventional predominant culture and take full advantage of the energizing atmosphere at the festival. According to Father Asi:

There are some young people that attend the Marian festival for merely entertainment purposes. They drink alcohol, smoke marijuana (*bhang*) and other forms of hallucinogenics— their purpose is to simply enjoy and have fun. I do not condemn it since it is a part of the *mela*. These people represent just one of the categories of people and we should not be disturbed by them. Sometimes riots also take place but these incidents can

occur anywhere where three- to four-hundred thousand people are gathered. You cannot expect that there will not be a fight there; that is why there are police and security officials. But I want to say that this is all a part of the *ziyarat*, although the majority attend the *mela* for venerating Mary and to give votive offerings and thanks (Asi 2016).



Fig 5.5: Devotees performing dhamāl on the beat of the dhol at the Atari Darbar Shrine of Mehmood Chishti in Lahore.

Father Asi shared that in addition to the devotional aspects of the pilgrimage, commercialism also attracts people from neighboring villages. He explained that the entire event during the pilgrimage is divided into two parts: the commercial side and the spiritual side (Asi 2016). The commercial area is separated from the spiritual space by a stream that flows in between.

Langar

Father Asi explained that when the first *mela* took place, the people from the three villages that took part in its preparation ate the food collectively in the form of *لنگر langar* (Asi 2016). According to Father Asi, “*Langar* is a very Sufi word and it is a beautiful concept” (Asi 2016). I

asked him if the concept of *langar* was inspired by Sikhism, since it is common for the Sikh devotees to organize *langars* in their temples. Father Asi replied:

Langar means eating together and we as Catholics celebrate the ritual of the Holy Communion during the Eucharistic celebration, which is the breaking of the bread and drinking of the wine as the body and blood of Jesus Christ. Thus, we have a fellowship and a sense of communion that we adhere to. Where ever there is a sacred shrine, there is an occurrence of shared eating and gathering. The meaning of a sacred shrine is that which is open to all people. In a church, mosque or a temple, there is a set time for performing rituals, there is a time to stand and to sit, whereas the realm of popular religiosity is free from such barriers (Asi 2016).

At the shrine of Mariamabad, there is a separate section for communal eating (*langar*) where devotees cook in large cauldrons (mostly of rice) and eat together as a community. Likewise, along with the tomb itself, Sufi shrines often also have a mosque, a lodge, a communal kitchen, and sometimes a hospital, and the pilgrims are given food and shelter for the night by the local population (Frembgen 2008, 35). The food cooked in the cauldrons is distributed generously among the devotees and pilgrims as offerings. In the Sufi context, such food donations are called *niyaz*—an Arabic word for offering, supplication, or prayer, and is mainly used to refer to the sacred food which is distributed for free at the Sufi shrines (Boivin 2015, 197). Father Asi explained that whenever one goes to a revered shrine, for instance at a Sufi or a Catholic shrine, eating anything from there, even if it is a small piece of dessert (such as at the Sufi shrines) gives a devotee a sense of belonging to the larger devotional community (Asi 2016).

At the Marian shrine, a similar ritual takes place, but instead of the word *niyaz*, pilgrims and devotees use the term *shukar-guzari* to describe this phenomenon. During the three-day pilgrimage time, professional *daig* makers present at the shrine take the orders for the offering

from devotees and cook the rice for them in the designated common area. Devotees give food offerings freely to the pilgrims as a gesture of thanks when their intention is fulfilled, and it is also distributed as a form of votive offering. For example, a devotee could order fifty cauldrons of rice to be cooked and distributed among the pilgrims (Asi 2016). During meal times at the Marian shrine, people, regardless of their religious or material differences, eat as a community to symbolize the mutual respect and brotherhood. According to Father Asi, “Devotees are eager to share food with each other during the *langar*. Even the wealthiest people, who eat the best meals in their house, refuse to leave the shrine without eating from the *langar* of the Holy Mother Mary, especially if they are devoted” (Asi 2016). Thus, when eating from the *langar* at the Marian shrine, the barriers between the social classes are generally disregarded.

Walking Barefoot

Walking barefoot to Mariamabad is a common practice among the pilgrims. For most of the devotees, the main purpose for such a practice is to show reverence to Mary. It is also a part of making vow in which people partake in austerities until their intention is fulfilled through Mary’s intercession. Adherents observe certain forms of flesh mortification, including crawling on the knees, physically rolling on the street and fasting, not as a form of penance, but as an expression of devotion.

Often ascetics and mystics choose to be barefoot as a vow of poverty and as a sign of modesty. However, the Hebrew Bible contains many references to barefootness in the presence of the holy. For example, in the book of Exodus, it is written: “Then He said, ‘Do not come near here; remove your sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy

ground.””³⁹ In the book of Joshua, it is written: “The captain of the Lord’s host said to Joshua, ‘Remove your sandals from your feet, for the place where you are standing, is holy.’ And Joshua did so.”⁴⁰ In both of these references, being barefoot signifies cleanliness, and thus this act separates the sacred realm from the profane. For the devotees of Mary at Mariamabad, coming in her presence barefoot indicates that they accord her the honor worthy of the divine.



Fig 5.6: Various forms of flesh mortifications including crawling on the knees, rolling on the streets, fasting for intention fulfillment are observed by the adherents as a ritualistic vow to Mary, the mother of Jesus. (Google Image)

According to Mawlānā Abdul Khabir Azad, for devotees at any sacred shrine, whether it is the Marian Shrine of Mary or the Sufi shrine of Hazrat Data Gunj Baksh, to enter the space of worship barefoot is to exhibit reverence towards that holy man or woman in whose honor the shrine is built (Azad 2016). Likewise, Father James Channan O.P. explained that appearing barefoot in the presence of the divine or at places of worship, whether it is a church or a mosque, also has cultural implications (Channan 2016). He explained that in Pakistan, parents or elders of the family, such as grandparents, are addressed with reverence. Often times, the younger generation greets the elders by touching their feet as a sign of respect, and it is considered disrespectful to turn one’s back to parents or seniors (Channan 2016). Likewise, Mary is honored

³⁹ Exodus 3:5. NRSV.

⁴⁰ Joshua 15:5. NRSV.

as a respected matriarch and her devotees at Mariamabad adopt similar behaviors, such as walking to the shrine barefoot. Some walk for over hundred miles, while others take off their shoes at the gates of shrine and remain barefoot for the entire three-day pilgrimage.

Devotional Hymns

Singing hymns in praise of Mary is an important devotional motif at the Marian shrine of Mariamabad. Hymns that honor Mary's role as a universal mother validate her importance within the Catholic community. Throughout the pilgrimage, hymns are sung in both the Punjabi and Urdu languages. During the Eucharistic Mass, the Mariamabad church choir leads the worship session. During the annual pilgrimage in the year 2016, the choir sat at the right side of the central stage and was comprised of men and women from diverse age groups. They played live musical instruments and wore white and blue clothes (the colors associated with Mary) and the professional gospel singers and *qawwals* (see below) kept the festive spirit alive during the worship sessions that usually took place during the night time.

During the pilgrimage, trained singers sing *qawwali* ⁴¹ *قوالی* which is unique to South Asian culture. Some Marian devotional songs are inspired by the Sufi *qawwalis* and are enjoyed immensely by the devotees, who enjoy the spiritual ambiance created by this kind of Sufi composition. Although in South Asia the word *qawwali* (to recite) generally refers to any form of Sufi music, formally the phenomenon is called the *sama*, an Arabic word which means "hearing." *Qawwali* is described as, "the ritualized performance of ecstatic Sufi poetry accompanied by music" (Rozehnal 2007, 213). "Promoted by the Chishti Sufi order since the

⁴¹(Boivin 2015, 256). "*Qawwali* is a term for Sufi music in the Indian subcontinent; it is a type of Hindustani light classical music set to mystical poetry in Persian, Urdu, and Sindhi that is performed at Sufi shrines. It is rather popular in North India and Pakistani Punjab."

twelfth century, this unique genre of religious expression has inspired poets, spiritual seekers, and general audiences as well.” (Rozeahnal 2007, 213). Cheerful, inspirational, and potentially mystical, *qawwali* is often described as Indo-Muslim gospel music in both lyrics and composition (Rozeahnal 2007, 214). According to Robert Thomas Rozeahnal:

From Bollywood film soundtracks to popular music, *qawwali* is ubiquitous, transcending religious and cultural borders. Recently, the growing popularity to “world music” has brought *qawwali* to new international audiences, transforming famous *qawwali* performers such as late Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and ensembles such as Sabri Brothers into mass-marketed global popstars. Yet even as *qawwali* expands its boundaries and explores new frontiers, it remains deeply rooted in South Asian Sufi history, piety and practice (Rozeahnal 2007, 213).

Manifestation of *qawwali* at a Catholic religious shrine demonstrates the unique process by which a religious practice from one belief system finds an acceptance within a dissimilar religious space. The catalyst of this process is the dynamism of culture, which blends the two entities together. Father Asi explained:

During the three-day pilgrimage, especially at night time, *qawwali* ensembles from different parts of the country are present at the local cemetery located near the Marian shrine. They convene at their designated areas and sing *qawwali*. The devotees are aware about the seating arrangement of the *qawwali* singers. They listen to the *qawwali* and pay some sort of offering to the singers as a token of appreciation (Asi 2016).

Apart from the manifestation of *qawwali* and other non-Catholic devotional forms observed at the Marian shrine, traditional Punjabi Catholic hymns found in the hymn book, ہوشعنا: مقبول

اردو اور پنجابی مسیحی گیتوں اور مزامیر کا مجموعہ⁴² *Hoshānā: Māqbool Urdu āur Punjābi Māsihi*

⁴² Hosanna: A Collection of Celebrated Urdu and Punjabi Christian Hymns and Psalms.

Geeton ka Mājmooā are among the most popular devotional songs during the pilgrimage.

Through vibrant linguistic style and lyrical rhymes, poets have expressed their piety and fidelity to Mary. A translation of two famous Marian hymns, commonly sung at the Marian shrine of Mariamabad, is presented in appendix.

Violence and Security

Between November 2016 and February 2017, two religious shrines in Pakistan were targets of terrorism—the shrine of the Sufi saint Shah Noorani in the province of Baluchistan and the historical shrine of Hazrat Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sindh province (Aljazeera News 2017). The frequent occurrence of religious persecution and sectarian violence indicates that the supporters of fundamentalism work to disturb the religious harmony between the diverse populace.

Religious spaces such as the shrines dedicated to the holy men and women of God provide pilgrims with the opportunity to express their religious piety and experience spiritual satisfaction freely. Yet, for many devotees, this experience of the divine is not attained without a feeling of risk and vulnerability. The pilgrimage organizing committee at the Marian shrine receives innumerable threats each year before and during the onset of the annual pilgrimage (Asi 2016).

According to Father Asi:

Every year the government of Punjab provides all the necessary security support; there are police officers, traffic police as well as security men in civilian attire. The security measures are authorized from Sukheke Mandi which means that the security measures are provided from the two districts: Sheikhpura and Nankana Sahib. There are committees in charge of the security of the pilgrims and all the planning is done well in advance (Asi 2016).

Fear for the security of thousands of pilgrims is a constant concern to the local government of Punjab as well as to the Catholic clergy, but the devotion and commitment of the devotees overpowers the qualms of these concerned individuals. A flood of approximately three to four hundred thousand people start pouring into the shrine within the first twenty-four hours of the annual Marian festival and although it is a challenging task to oversee such a large number of people, providing security to the devotees is the foremost priority of the pilgrimage organizers as well as the local government (Asi 2016).

Thus, the presence of the individuals from the diverse religious communities at the religious shrines, whether it is the Marian Shrine of Mariamabad or the shrine of Shah Noorani, gives a clear message to the rivals of peace and to the concerned authorities: that to the devotees, spiritual satisfaction and devotion to saintly men and women and to the Divine elevates them beyond fear and animosity.

CONCLUSION

“Nothing worth doing can be achieved in our
lifetime...we must be saved by hope.”

—Reinhold Niebuhr

A year ago, I began this research to explore the spiritual practices and devotional rituals at the Marian Shrine at Mariamabad. I also aimed at investigating the existence of meta-religiosity in a devotional setting, associated with a minority religious group. Knowing that this particular Marian shrine is the only Catholic shrine in Punjab, Pakistan and is visited by both Catholics and non-Christians, my research led me to explore this sacred space.

During my visit to the shrine as an observer, I witnessed the evolving popular religiosities practiced by the pilgrims. The conversations with the devotees and the religious scholars of both Catholic and Islamic traditions enabled me to broaden the research focus from the Mariological aspect to the topic of inter-religious harmony through the process of collective devotion. Also, by conducting extensive research in the field of Mariology and by exploring Islamic piety for Mary, I now recognize that this thesis can serve as a basis for future research into devotional intersections. The spiritual phenomenon taking place at this shrine in a part of the world where little academic research has taken place previously requires further scholarly examination, not simply for scholars of religion, but also for those who wish to examine it from historical, political, social, and anthropological perspectives.

My current research does not cover the Hindu and Sikh devotees of Mary at Mariamabad shrine, so I, or other researchers, still need to explore this further in future work. During my research, I was also interested in conducting an in-depth comparison of the Sufi rituals with the Catholic practices to determine if any shared rituals are performed at the Sufi shrines. For future research, I would also like to explore the trail of the Catholic missionaries who entered South Asia, and the impact of colonialism on Pakistani minorities. It might then be possible to better understand the complex and troubled relationship of the minority religions with the dominant

Pakistani Muslim community. The abuse of minority rights and the infamous blasphemy laws⁴³ against minorities could be explored, as well as the potential role spiritual shrines play in facilitating peaceful dialogue between the opposing factions. Societal gender dynamics and the role and presence of female devotees at the Marian shrine of Mariamabad is yet another critical area of study. On a different note, it would also be worthwhile to compare the goddess veneration in Hindu tradition with the devotional rituals practiced at Mariamabad. However, for now, these multifaceted topics are beyond the scope of my current research.

Apart from the religious or pilgrimage sites in Pakistan, the research methodology employed here can potentially be used to study shared sacred spaces in other parts of the world. I aim to broaden the scope of current research work by examining the intersecting devotional practices and the role of sacred sites in promoting peace in the region, such as religious shrines in the Philippines and the Middle East. For example, Our Lady of Saidnaya in Syria is well known because of the presence of the devotees from different religions. An important site of devotion within the shrine of Our Lady of Saidnaya is a chapel where an icon, supposedly painted by Saint Luke, is hidden under a plethora of silver, gold, and gems (Albera 2012, 14). Pilgrims of both Christian and Muslim faiths come from Syria, Lebanon, and elsewhere, and they carry out identical rituals mostly related to the oil collected under the image (Albera 2012, 14).

I have presented the unique blend of rituals and devotional practices that occur at the Marian shrine at Mariamabad by examining the history of the rise of Marian veneration among Christians, the dogmatic significance of Mary within the Catholic tradition, and the devotional practices adopted by the devotees of Mary. In my observation, the shrine at Mariamabad serves

⁴³ (BBC News Asia 2014). Pakistan's blasphemy laws carry a potential death sentence for anyone who insults Islam. Critics claim they have been used to persecute minority faiths and unfairly target minorities.

as a dynamic religious space for the local population even though the people practice different religions. During the annual Marian pilgrimage, devotees find their own spiritual space within the distinctive setting of the shrine. At the same time, devotees experience the presence of the numinous in the form of Mary, who acts as a bridge between themselves and the divine. The pilgrims venerate her from a personal rather than an institutional religious standpoint. To the devotees, she is not revered just as Mary, the mother of Jesus, but she is the “Heavenly Mother” who listens to the pleas of her children whenever they come into her presence. The unique encounter of the pilgrims with the figure of Mary, and the spiritual satisfaction they find at the shrine signify that religious devotion transcends the barriers of culture and tradition by assimilating local cultural values and traditions.

APPENDIX

Devotional Hymns from Mariamabad

Hymn 221⁴⁴

<p>(221)</p> <p>در آسماں ہے پیاری ماں - مریم - مریم - مریم مجھ پہ ہمیشہ مہرباں - مریم - مریم - مریم میں نے گناہ جب تھے کئے ماگنی دُعا میرے لئے اپنے پیارے بیٹے سے - مریم - مریم - مریم کچھ بھی نہیں جب تھا بنا - مریم - مریم - مریم تجھ کو خدا نے چن لیا - مریم - مریم - مریم خاتونِ پاک و لا خطا پیارے یسوع کی والدہ</p> <p>قومِ خدا کی ثالثہ - مریم - مریم - مریم تجھ سے میں وعدہ کرتا ہوں - مریم - مریم - مریم میں ہر گناہ سے ڈرتا ہوں - مریم - مریم - مریم شیطان سے جائے پناہ تُو آسمان کی راہ دکھا بیٹے کے گھر مجھ کو لے جا - مریم - مریم - مریم</p>	<p>(221)</p> <p>You are the door of heaven, O beloved Mother —Mary, Mary, Mary! Always Merciful towards me—Mary, Mary, Mary!</p> <p>When I sinned, You prayed for me, To your beloved Son—Mary, Mary, Mary!</p> <p>When nothing was created in this world— Mary, Mary, Mary! God had already chosen you—Mary, Mary, Mary!</p> <p>O pure woman, entirely flawless, Mother of Beloved Jesus, Mediator of God's nation—Mary, Mary, Mary!</p> <p>I promise you—Mary, Mary, Mary! That I am afraid of committing sin—Mary, Mary, Mary!</p> <p>Refuge from the Satan, You show me the way to the heaven, Take me to your Son's home—Mary, Mary, Mary.</p>
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⁴⁴ (Amir, Hymn number 221 2016).

<p>(226)</p> <p>رانی اے آسمان دے ہوئے تینوں سلام تینوں کرن ملائک سلاماں کل نسلان خاص تے عاماں وچ جگ تمام توں بے داغ حمل وچ پیوؤں خالی اصلی گناہ تھوں رہیوں ٹوئیں پاک مدام تیرے وچ گناہ دا سایہ کدی ہرگز نہیں آیا نہ توں ہوئی غلام تینوں قبروں رُب جوایا رُوح بدن سمیت اٹھایا کیتا عرش مقام</p> <p>توں تے شافی ساڈا جایا جس نے سانوں آن بچایا رُب دا اوہ ہے کلام توں ہیں ساڈی ماں پیاری غماں وچ تسلی بھاری دھن تیرا ہے نام ہے سفارش تیری کاری ایس منگدے ہاں بھتی واری نت صبح تے شام ساڈے کول اخیر نوں آویں ہتھیں اپنی آن پلاویں نیک موت دا جام</p>	<p>(226)</p> <p>Salutation to you, O Queen of Heaven! Kings salute you and all humanity—rich and poor, And the whole creation! You were born through Immaculate Conception— You are the only one saved from the original sin, You are the chaste matriarch! Shadow of sin—have never touched you, Nor were you ever enslaved! God saved you from the grave—raised your body and soul, Enthroned you in the heaven! You gave birth to our Healer—who saved us all He is the word of God! You are our beloved Mother—our hope during despair, Blessed be your name! Through your intercession—we pray each time, Every Morning and Evening! Come to us in the end—with your own hands, Give us the drink of righteous death.</p>
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⁴⁵ (Amir, Hymn number 226 2016)

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